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A NUMBER OF THINGS

A NUMBER OF THINGS BY DIXON SCOTT

*"The world is so full of a number of things
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings."*

" . . . Then there are the essays. But
I find that these aren't to be done by
doggedness. One gets them red-hot:
they have to be hammered out in a
fury: that's their quality and claim."
Extract from a letter of Dixon Scott's.

T. N. FOULIS
LONDON & EDINBURGH

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PREFACE

ONE of the many books of Dixon Scott's that were to be written when he came back after the war was a book of essays. 'I've been systematising it lately and finishing some of the sketches for it,' he wrote in the spring of 1913. In the same letter he says, 'There are nature things in it such as "The Winds," there are one or two motor things, and there is "The Cloud"' (which here appears as "The Shadow").

Very little of the work was ever done, but the motto, from Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses* which I have put on the first page and from which the title is taken, was chosen by him for that other book.

Dixon Scott never came back from the war—he died of dysentery on a hospital ship at Gallipoli on October 23rd, 1915—and this book of his essays is not his book as he would have made it. But his friends are all of one mind, that it is well worth while getting together the few essays that are left in a pocket volume such as he himself always carried in his knapsack when he went out in search of adventure by the Mysterious Road or lost himself on the lonely heights of the Lake District.

During the last few years of his life almost the whole of Dixon Scott's work was in the form

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of literary criticism. Much of the best of it is to be found in his book *Men of Letters*, published a year ago by Messrs. Hodder & Stoughton. The earliest essays in the present book go back almost to the beginning of his career as a writer, and all of them belong to the six years 1906-1911. "The Winds," "The Shadow," and "An Apology for Hawthorn," appeared in *The Manchester Guardian*; "Winter, that Rough Nurse," and "Motoring by Night," in *Country Life*. "A Real River" has not, so far as I can gather, been printed before. The others all came out in *The Liverpool Courier*.

The work of selection was entrusted to me, and the responsibility for the result is mine, but I should like to say that his other friends—perhaps I need not mention them by name—have all given me their most cordial support and assistance and, I hope I may add, their approval.

BERTRAM SMITH

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I THE MYSTERIOUS ROAD

THE MYSTERIOUS ROAD

IT sprang suddenly out, white and precipitate, from before the skinless face of that raw northern hill upon which one looks from the Castle above Llangollen; and it fled away, in strong, level flight, towards the gracious foothills in the west. It streamed across the highlands before me like a thin white flame; and the sense of its speed, of its directness, of its intent pursuit of some remote, magnificent quest rang across the valley like a splendid call. It fired the imagination and sent it beating hungrily out into the unknown. It filled the mind with the mystery of strange places; it stirred the heart like music. It was a visible impetuous song, that long white road; it was a noble irresistible saga. It flashed in white pursuit from east to west, sounding an onset, entreating volunteers.

Like a splendid
call

A little golden valley, set with one white farm, cupped the empty air that lay between . . . A few moments of greyscree, a mild interval of sward, and then, by the side of that lonely house, I surrendered myself to the Road. Its goal was now my goal. Its far mysterious purpose was equally my own.

And now there ensued for a space that rare exaltation of the blood which all those know, and only those know, who have taken an un-

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The song
of the Celtic
singer

known way in the light of a clean spring morning. My Road had all the right road qualities. It was lonely, it was broad, it was white, it was crisp underfoot. It commanded a sweet far prospect. And great grey buttresses of naked rock rose endlessly up on its right hand, and lifted the sight to the noiseless tumult of the clouds. Here and there, on the face of these crags, a black clot of yew leaped out against the grey, in a kind of velvet-footed passion; always, as I stepped, sweet airs from the moorlands above eagerly saluted me; and the way, for all its levelness, was thus made tonic with the sense of high places. The blood burned with impulses, and my mind ran back to the great song of the old Celtic singer that somebody had chanted for me, not many nights before, in a lost little cottage in a fold of purple hills. And as I marched along I turned it, for easier mouthing, into a kind of rough-shod English verse:—

I am Over-Lord of the Hills and the High Places,
And it is the chosen breath of the mountains that I seize
and change into words.

My bed is as near to the Stars as my labouring Minister,
the Earth, can lift me up,
And my thoughts move as far above the Stars as my eager
Heart can carry them.

I am Over-Lord of the Hills and the High Places.
The Streams make their Songs among the Clouds—
But I—I am higher than the Streams.

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The Eagle brings forth its brood on the dizzy pinnacles—
But I—I look down upon its nesting-place;
And the Songs that I rear are swifter in flight than the
arrogant brood of the Eagle,
And the sound of my Songs is more piercingly sweet than
the sound of the Songs of the Streams.

A House of
the utmost
graciousness

And thus pleasantly engaged,—whittling, so
to say, a blunt substitute for the old, keen-tipped
arrow,—and fitting it, too, to a rude bow of
melody of my own devising,—I came round
a great curve to the northward and so within
sight of a House of the utmost graciousness
and beauty.

Now with regard to this House there is a
curious experience which I might relate but will
not—partly because it would take overlong,
partly because it may one day itself make an
article, and partly because you would no doubt
consider it a foolishness. Which, not impos-
sibly, it was. So I will simply say that the House
lay there like a ripe fruit among the rich branches
of the hills and woods; that the scented surf of
an orchard broke soundlessly upon its walls;
that there were golden meadows all about it, and
a stream moving across them to the sound of
music; that the music of the stream and the
endless tumult of the birds appeared to form
part of the building. It seemed fitted to form
an emblem for all that in the way of earthly

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The solitary
traveller

happiness men most ardently desire; and as though it had been in fact a sentinel, a guardian of choice passages, the road I followed, instantly after passing it, seemed to shake itself more than ever free from the touch of common interests. Pressing northwards now, running ever more deeply into the hills, it drew the limits of the valley ever more privately about it. It drew the wooded heights on the left so closely towards it that, as they flung back their streaming manes of larch and fir, and stormed magnificently up the steep ascent of the sky, one listened to catch their quick and passionate breathing. On the right, those grave grey heights, curving in one company, still moved in a long procession of stupendous buttresses and groins. The interspace was filled with a heavy silence that the voices of the river and the birds served only to complete, to fence inviolately about. There was no sun, but one scarcely missed it; for the meadows by the riverside filled the quietness with gold.

And it was here, in the midst of this growing intensity and unanimity, that I met the solitary traveller I was to meet that day.

He was riding, and as though towards the House I had but lately left, and his horse was black and magnificent. He, too, was of good

THE MYSTERIOUS ROAD

presence, with eyes of a fine zeal and courage. I saluted him and he drew rein. I asked him where the Road would lead me to. To the World's
End

And in that rapt and lonely place, beneath the gravely marching heights, this black horseman, leaning intently forward in his saddle, said:

‘It will lead you to the World’s End.’

And having said that he shook his horse into a trot, and straightway disappeared among the trees.

But here, unhappily for effectiveness, unhappily for mystery, unhappily for romance and all the other great things that make life worth living and journeys worth going and articles worth writing and reading, here I must stop to explain, lest you should be inclined to accuse me of mere invention, that what the man spoke was no wild phantasy but a piece of sober topographical fact. The Road did indeed lead to the ‘World’s End.’ Take out your ordnance map for North Wales and go northward a little from Llangollen and there you will see it for yourselves, that astounding epithet, planked boldly down among ‘Lead Mines’ and ‘Slate Quarries’ and the like—the name given to a cul-de-sac among the hills, to a little cauldron at the end of a blind valley from which there is no egress save by rarely-used pathways among the rocks.

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The measure
of my dis-
appointment

. . . But for me, who possessed no map of any sort, the thing remained white magic. Had this strange Horseman said 'The Hollow Land,' or 'El Dorado,' or 'The Golden Age' he could scarcely have thrilled me more. 'The World's End'—it was like a tag from some old mad fairy-tale. It was like a scrap of sheer Morris. It was a scrap of sheer Morris. Would there be a Well at the World's End, I wondered.

And it fitted, of course, precisely to the tune of the hour and the place. The queer, guarded silence of the valley became a due preparatory ritual, an overture, cleansing and solemnising. The Road's own air of speed and momentousness,—this was now explained. The meaning of its strength and remoteness—its width, so great that six horses might gallop abreast and never a brier flaw their coats—and yet so empty and untrodden—was now made manifest. The presence of that great company of grey enigmatic rocks seemed now appropriate. This was indeed no common road. It led to the World's End. It led to signs and wonders.

The manner and measure of my disappointment those will know who have traversed that road themselves. I came in due course indeed to a lonely house that seemed to promise somewhat of romance; a lonely house lying inscrut-

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ably beside a lonely garden with a dim wood behind. Antique quarterings of black oak were crossed upon its breast, and these, and its whiteness, and the silence, and the empty grave of the garden, made it look like a waiting corpse. And yet I was willing to believe that at any instant the sightless windows might quiver into life, that the old door might swing wonderfully ajar, that one might pass out into the breathless quiet who would bring the day its due accomplishment. . . . But, although I waited for a while, none appeared, and I left the black trees looking sternly down upon the unfinished ceremony.

Golden swarms
of primroses

And after that I came to a place where vast constellations of primroses, twinkling galaxies of primroses, ropes and dripping branches and golden swarms of primroses, flashed exultantly upon a vermeil firmament. Flung down superbly on a steeply sloping meadow, they rolled and poured and span to the verge of the stream—an impetuous golden tributary. I sat in the midst of them by the water's edge and (following in this the terms of an old recipe) plucked a few of a certain size and succulence. These, as I ate my lunch there, made a kind of salad, vastly refreshing to the palate. In the cold purity of the water, too, there lay a faint sweet-

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The place of
rocks ness, like the far-away song of a robin in a clear
winter's dawn. . . . But, although these things
were very pleasant, cold water and primroses
scarcely seemed to fulfil the Road's brave pro-
mises.

And after that I was received into a swart
fir-wood. It was full of a dumb passion—a re-
morse that could find no tears seemed to live
in the heart of it—a tragic unrest tragically
compelled to immobility. . . . But it was no
dumb passion that I sought; it was rather some
clear dispassionate utterance that would serve
to make all passions articulate for ever.

And after that I came to the place of rocks
which forms the uttermost limits of the valley.
Some of the rocks were livid, some were grey,
and some, in the bed of the stream, were of the
colour of ancient bloodstains. The voice of the
stream echoed through all this place in a con-
tinuous and proud lament. I sat there for a
space, and noted how that voice never varied
its utterance, and yet how, in spite of that, it
was now like the clamour of armed men, and
now like a human cry just passing into speech,
and now like two voices speaking together, the
one pleadingly, the other mockingly. . . . And
I noticed, too, how strangely easy it was to en-
vision in their finest detail all the things that

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these noises summoned to the imagination: the faces of the speakers, the aspect of the plumed horsemen. . . . But these were thoughts of the kind that come by any stream-side. It was not needful to journey to the World's End to receive them. . . .

A story
without an
ending

And so, in the end, I was obliged to own myself defeated, to leave the place unsatisfied. It was an unanswered enigma I told myself as I climbed up the rocky pathway that led to the upper world; it was an unfinished phase, a broken song, an arrow turned in mid-flight. It was a story without an ending, it was a portrait with the face left blank. It was life itself.

I came out at last upon the edge of the vast spaces of moorland up above. The heather rose and fell illimitably; great winds strode splendidly from sky to sky; and at the touch of those lordly gales and the sight of those surging prospects all the doubts and hopes and tremors of the valley below fell away like a coil of dreams. . . . All the youth of the world was in that noble air. The strength and clarity as of an endless dawn burned in the light that filled the proud, free spaciousness. I tasted once more, in my measure, that exaltation of high places of which my old Poet had sung. To speak solemnly of the World's End now, to think with any desire

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The
Beginning

of it and its dim, strange wells, became an utter foolishness. For here, mother-naked among the sweet immortal elements, terrible and magnificent with promises and possibilities, there lay outstretched before me the Beginning.

II THE SHADOW



THE SHADOW

WHEN I heard, the other morning, that D.'s doctors had condemned him to a desperate operation, I hurried round through the rain to his cottage at the end of the village, fumbling hopelessly as I went for some apt commiserative formula. For D. (who writes) is one of those lean, strained, astringent people whom even pleasure seems to harass. 'There's a cloud to every silver lining,' I once heard him say. What could one now say to such a man that would serve to lighten the darkness of this quite implacable cloud? I found him in his little bookroom staring out at the storm. An omen, I thought miserably; and led off non-committally. 'Feel?' he cried in response, twirling round; 'why, I'm having the time of my life! You've heard, of course? They find they must knife me—next week. And they tell me it's ticklish—a toss-up. And so—but there's the sun again! I mustn't miss that. Come along!'

One of those
lean, astringent
people

We stepped out on to his little scrap of lawn, with its scrubby borders and its shabby-genteel mound of rhododendrons in the middle. Upturning his face so that the sunlight rained full upon it, 'Lord! That's good,' he said; and seemed, with his half-opened lips and half-closed eyes, actually to drain the warmth down. 'Feel?'

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The full flavour
of things

Well, I fancy I feel rather like a worried man of affairs who has taken a whole day's holiday in order to draw up his will. Tremendously leisured, you know, in the first place. Tremendously undistracted. Not since I was breeched, I suppose, have I enjoyed such freedom—from freedom. For everything's fixed, you see; there's no choice. And so there's no pestering problem—none of those lacerating alternatives which tear you to pieces when you're at liberty to choose. The sheltered snugness of the narrow road! Ah!

He drew out his pipe and a little gleaming filler, and sent the cartridge lovingly home. 'And then the holiday is such a *Holy Day*. Your will-maker goes pottering about among his possessions—his old sticks of furniture and so on,—and somehow the least little bit of a thing becomes queerly solemnified—beatified by the big Presences he can't help calling up. It's pretty much that way with me. You simply *can't* treat things casually when you're seeing them for perhaps the last time. Positively when I light this old pipe I feel a sort of acolyte kindling a censer. And, I say! That's the way to get the full flavour of things! Flowers and food and all. You'll remember the irascible way I used to regard grub? As—well, as something

THE SHADOW

"grubby," an earthly interruption—a kind of concession. But now! They want more beef on my bones before they butcher me, and so I've got to feed heftily. But every mouthful's a joy! I breakfast with a sort of solemn glee. I want to write odes to eggs-and-bacon. Genuinely! Not theoretical stuff that turns a beefsteak into a thing of beauty or makes a ham sandwich a fit subject for a sonnet. I want the sonnet to be about the sandwich. I want to celebrate the beauty of the beef's own flavour. And why not? It's not a bit more physical than the poetised perfume of flowers.

The exotic
splendour of
a barn-door
fowl

'Not that I don't get more out of flowers, too,' he went on. 'Just look here! These rhododendrons! Bourgeois I used to think 'em—stodgy and stuffy. But lounging here yesterday, in this new mood of tranquil intensity, I discovered they were really indescribably subtle and shy. Like frail clusters of lilies, those white ones. As recondite and exquisite as orchids, these commonplace mauves. Vulgar? Obvious? Why, violets are brazen hussies to 'em. And that's typical. That's the kind of discovery I'm making all day long—finding treasures I've been too busy to see before. Hens, now. Do you know, I never realised till now the exotic splendour of a barn-door fowl! Or the beauty of a

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An echo of old
exasperation

bantam—gemmy and fine as a brooch. Cows, too. Have you ever cast an unpreoccupied glance at a Hereford? It's a staggering experience! That wild flourish of horn—the white mask beneath, like the painted face of a clown,—the body all patterned and painted—the wholeradiant thing uprising in the midst of the meadow from which it draws its life! And then, whilst you watch it, it moves. Moves! A piece of the landscape come alive! Talk about men as trees walking. . . .

‘And even here, you know, in this bit of a back garden, I can't get away from the suggestiveness—the emphasis of things. Why, this patch is for all the world like a witches' cauldron. You go about with a hoe. You poke and you stir. And then—pouf!—out rushes the maddest riot—colours and odours and queer, uncanny shapes. Pink foam of poppies. And crimson bubbles of roses. And over there, I solemnly assure you, gobbets of juicy red flesh! Fact! Things my little niece Margot calls “stlaw-bellies.”’

He laughed, but his laugh wound up with a little protesting cry—an echo of his old exasperation. ‘And folk won't see it. We go gathering fresh loot, and forget the things we have. I want to tell people that. *Nous sommes tous con-*

THE SHADOW

damnés—the only difference is that I've been lucky enough to realise it! And I want to tell folks. I want to get 'em all to draw up their wills! If only I had more time—that's my solitary sorrow. *I want to write a book about those things—about buttercups and cows and ham sandwiches. I want to write a book called "Unconsidered Trifles."*

"Unconsidered Trifles"

That was plainly my mark, and I notched it as neatly as I could. "Unconsidered Trifles," I said, 'will be the jolliest book you've ever done. It will be one of the notable books of the year!'

III AN APOLOGY FOR HAWTHORN

AN APOLOGY

IT certainly needs an advocate. Our country diarists, indeed, good-natured critics, are just now doing their best to sing its praises prettily; but professional honour, if nothing else, forces them to add at least one word about its cool unpunctuality. Nor can we quite decently debit the comet with this particular lapse. For it was long before he came to muddle up the march-past of the seasons that the hawthorn hedges began to lag behind, and the may-blossom, like a *blasé* grown-up, to drop the pretty custom of keeping its own birthday. Not for many years now, even if they too had not grown too staid for suchlike frolics, have our mid-England villagers been granted enough bloom to make a buttonhole for one May queen, let alone wreaths for half a hundred. This year, for instance, the month was well past its meridian before a faint sprinkle of ivory pellets, like the relics of a late shower of hail, appeared on our Midland hedges; and it was not till the other morning, beneath a sun that seemed to have desperately borrowed something of the generosity of June, that the little spheres thawed into stars, melting and filling the crannies with drifts of fragrant snow. But though it has got above birthdays the hawthorn has not reached the pitch of robbing children

Its cool
unpunctuality

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As a kind of
broad, green
tide

of their posies in order to save adult toes from frost-bite later on. It has been a near thing, though—the nearest one remembers. Already it has touched the rim of a rival's territory. Let it lag still longer next year, and the English lanes will watch a staggering sight—the wild roses of June and the may-blossom warring together for mastery, with the honeysuckle climbing convulsively all about. A battle of flowers indeed!

'There is but one variety of common hawthorn,' say the text-books stiffly; but to travel through England this week, from south to north, is to learn that that is but another of those prim, starched, scientific statements which are far too goody-goody to be true. Actually there are as many kinds of may-blossom as there are varieties of soil. That is a pleasant fancy, and a not too fallacious, which figures our English summer as a kind of broad, green tide, sweeping swiftly from south to north, up the broad beaches of fallow and field; and in such a picture the blossom plays the part of surf—a scented spume bursting up at every obstructing hedge. Just as various as foam itself are these dancing breakers of bloom. Piquantly enough, all the rebellious variety is the direct result of profound docility. There is, first of all, the tractability

AN APOLOGY

of the plant itself—that pleasant pliability of temper which has won it a practical monopoly of the great task of carving up England in slices, clipping the country into manageable portions. This task alone, no matter how conducted, would plainly make variety inevitable; for since its performer is compelled to pass in turn through every type of landscape, every type of landscape can be used in turn to flash new meanings on the blossoms sprayed before it. But the hawthorn, as it happens, does its work in quite a special way, and so secures a still wider range of effects. For it not only rims a dukedom and a cabbage patch with equal alacrity; it also displays a queer capacity for taking colour from its environment—adopting the local accent and falling into step with the local features.

Adopting the
local accent

Down among the parklands of the South, for instance, where opulence affects a paunchy trimness the hedgerows seem positively to meet the efforts of the clipper half-way, cheerily assisting his operations with the shears, until at length they lie across the fat feather-beds of fields like so many plump green bolsters. A little further north, again, you enter a ruder belt whose poverty leaves little time for trimming, and there you find it not only grasping

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By dint of
docility

the situation just as briskly, twisting and twining unprompted into businesslike outworks and defences, but also summing up exactly the slightly shaggy, homespun scene. Set it on a sweep of lawn, again, and your hawthorn will grow as elegant and debonnair as any rose tree; but transplant it to a northern fell, and you will see the strangest transformation. It grows hunchbacked and sinister, crouches and contracts, stiffens its sinews and breaks out into a dark and dwarfish muscularity. And it is by dint of docility once more that all these variations are perfectly repeated by the blossom itself. For they follow the stem obediently; each little bunch of bloom, too, is upraised to an equal height; and by a singular arrangement (which even the text-books dwell upon) no floweret in that bunch is permitted to rise above his fellows. As a result there are none of those independent gushes and flights which make, say, a wild cherry *garnished* so vastly different from a wild cherry *nature*; there are none of the trailing digressions of wistaria or laburnum. Again, since the bush itself, as old Thomas Lyte, Esq., was unscientific enough to see, sometimes 'groweth lowe and crooked' and sometimes 'waxeth high as a Perrie or Pear-tree', so too the flowers are sometimes like trans-

AN APOLOGY

verse silver seams, silting into horizontal cran-
nies and clefts, and are sometimes tall white
wands and nodding plumes, like the radiant
rods and sceptres of some regal cavalcade. It
is about the poor man's plot, agreeably enough,
that you get the full gamut displayed. For there
the pliant stems try all sorts of arboreal tricks,
looping, drooping, leaping, climbing capricious-
ly, or shooting suddenly up like a host of sal-
uting swords; and there, too, the flower, follow-
ing all this freakishness unfalteringly, tosses off
a dazzling troop of permutations—crescents,
crosses and crosiers, plumes, levelled lances—
until you would swear that old Proteus himself
had wound the wreathed thorn.

One strikes a
subtler strain

These are obvious phases—familiar to all.
Here and there, though, one strikes a subtler
strain—that revelation, for instance, among
the complacent parklands of what looks like a
vein of sly humour. Its task, down there, is to
translate the countryside into terms of may. It
does it by decking it with bunchy little buttons
of bloom, little vaguely vulgar rosettes. And the
effect is almost as disquieting as one of those
half-concealed smiles which sometimes show
us, at table, that they also watch who only stand
and wait. Out on the fells, again, its ingenuity
scores a singular triumph, as any Cumberland

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Versatility with
a vengeance

hillside can show you at this minute. Nothing more menacing can be imagined than one of those twisted trees thrusting its arms about in a dwarfish ecstasy, and decked from head to foot with filmyscarves. It seems as though it ought to be amusing—a skinny gnome posturing in a ballet. But, in fact, it is incredibly macabre. Performed before a purple background of storm and straining peaks—on the upper slopes of Wansfell, say, with Scafell and the Pikes in the distance,—it makes a picture packed with menace.

And this capacity for fitting in equally well with scenes of prettiness and terror—is it not, after all, rather perfectly typical of the plant which is not only may-blossom but also the old albespine? Sir John Mandeville may not, indeed, be the least mendacious of recorders; but something unregenerate in us, thirsting for such clashing contrasts, makes us unanxious to cross-question him too cruelly when he tells us that it was ‘a Crowne’ of these very thorns that the Jews ‘sett on His Head so faste and so sore that the Bloode ran down in many places of his Visafe.’ Here is versatility with a vengeance!—first a property in the world’s most towering episode, and then a milkmaid’s wreath on a giggling village green. Nor is even this the end. For other

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AN APOLOGY

legends tell us that it was a thorn from this tragic crown, planted at Glastonbury by Joseph of Arimathea, which burst miraculously into blossom on one memorable Christmas day. These be mighty vagaries! They surely excuse its latter-day indifference to dates. It could once, it seems, celebrate some birthdays very notably. Let us overlook, then, this year anyhow, its cool disregard for its own. Mighty
vagaries

IV

ASS!

ASS!

The flowers of
the local flocks

PRODUCT, in the first instance, of the empty sand-plains of the East, the donkey, by a strange twist of fortune, has now become indigenous to the extravagantly populous sand-plains of our British seaboard; and there was therefore a double congruity in the background provided by the New Brighton shore for the charming little asinine ceremony enacted there the other afternoon. It was the occasion of the annual donkey competition, and the flowers of the local flocks, drawn up in a long decorous line, submitted themselves to the judgment of a famous expert, and endeavoured, by the engagingly simple process of standing still and looking supremely happy and contented, to exercise the gift of Midas to an extent denied them in their laborious everyday. In brief, a donkey show. Now that, on the face of it, is the kind of event that would seem to promise a good deal in the way of entertainment. The mere words, a donkey show, seem to carry all sorts of farcical and hilarious suggestions; and it might easily be supposed that the whole thing was specifically dedicated to the rather peculiar Comic Spirit of our islands. As a matter of fact, no supposition could be more completely irrelevant. A 'high seriousness,' a deep and deeply impressive solemnity—that was the dominant note

A NUMBER OF THINGS

A deeply
reverential
air

of the entire affair. The famous expert, walking silently round the exhibits, walking the exhibits silently round, pinching and punching and patting with an air of the supremest gravity; his satellites, with their frequent annotations, their portentous gestures; the donkeys themselves, so inexpressibly sedate; their attendants, too, acknowledging the significance of the event, not only by exchanging their accustomed vociferousness for a rigid taciturnity, but also by their assumption of the raiment peculiar to the South Lancashire Tripper; these, with the circle of mutely engrossed spectators, combined to give the celebration a deeply reverential air. No casual stranger, approaching from a distance, could have dreamed that the centre of this dignified and sober ritual was that object of ridicule and abuse, that subject of limitless contemptuous laughter, the common moke. For the common moke, by the engagingly simple process of looking supremely well-fed and contented, had done something much more important than abstracting a few prizes from the hands of the humane. It had succeeded as well in destroying a time-honoured jest, in robbing humanity of their right to laugh at it.

That fact, of course, contains the ingredients of a very pretty parable; and even to those of

ASS !

us for whom parables have lost something of their charm, it cannot fail to seem provocative of one rather interesting question. Why, after all, has the donkey become a target for so much derision? Why should its name become a synonym for the absurd? Were its resemblance to the horse a little closer, it might be possible to offer that fact as a solution; for there will always (and very properly) remain a large share of derisive laughter for the bad copy, the weak imitation, the distorted echo. But the donkey, with its long and scrupulous ancestry, can never be mistaken for a cheap edition of the horse; its physical qualities are independent and unique. Nor, as those New Brighton animals very clearly manifested, are those unique and independent qualities of a type to make men laugh. Their sleek slimness, their 'Quakerish elegance,' the delicate colours of their coats . . . here a delicate dove-grey, there an exquisite mouse . . . their neat heads, and the lithe efficiency of their tails; they are qualities, all of them, which it is impossible to regard other than with admiration. There is, of course, the question of intelligence; and here, it must be admitted, we find ourselves on rather delicate ground. We might refer, indeed, to the sensitiveness of eye and foot that has carried us so securely among the mountain

A target for
derision

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Explanation of
the mystery

paths of Sicily and Spain; but we prefer to remember that there are other animals of a vastly greater stupidity who have never been laughed at in the whole course of their career. 'There is the cow, for instance. We have never heard any particular hilarity on the topic of cows. Or, again, there is the sheep; the sheep which Lamb, that model of tenderness and humanity, once accused of being profoundly 'silly.' We have never noticed anybody holding their shaking sides when confronted by a sheep.

No, if we desire an explanation of the mystery we must push a little farther afield and (as so often happens in such cases) a little nearer home. So proceeding, we will probably discover it in the fact that the mirth-provoking donkey of tradition is not, strictly speaking, a donkey at all. The very cheapness which induced the Traveler in the Cevennes to confer immortality upon Modestine has struck a mortal blow at myriads of less fortunate Modestines both before and since; for it is cheapness, and not familiarity, that is the mother of contempt, and contempt brings with it tyranny and ill-usage, maltreatment in a hundred infinitely disastrous forms. Thus, in the course of years, the real donkey was slowly done to death, and there was left in its place the merest spectre, one of those dis-

ASS !

torted echoes for which, as we have seen, a torrent of derisive laughter is always waiting. So that it is not because the animal is a donkey that we have laughed at it. With a fine, unconscious justice, we have laughed at it because it is not a donkey. When, as at New Brighton, the real donkey reappears, our gibes are frozen, and we fall into a profound and reverent admiration. For every perfection means the death of a jest; an increase of happiness here means a decrease of merriment there; and our laughter more often than not, is a dreadful accusation, the signal of the discovery of something abortive, something undeveloped and incomplete. Wherefrom, again, by those who care for such things, a very human and thought-provoking moral might easily be deduced.

The real
donkey
reappears

V MOTORING AT NIGHT



MOTORING AT NIGHT

OF motoring after nightfall there are manifestly two main kinds. On the one hand, there is motoring by moon-light; on the other, there is motoring on nights of cloud or of undisputed stars. For my own part, I much prefer the latter. The risk is perhaps slightly greater. But if you are content with a tactful fifteen miles an hour, and if your car glares at the world through a pair of fierce acetylene eyes, you can really pick your way about a world that has been wonderfully drained of all traffic with almost as much composure as though you were on the Brighton Road at broad noon. But you must have those piercing head-lights, for it is on them that your pleasure will depend as well as your mere safety. Without them you would remain in the familiar region of the footmen. With them you instantly leap into a kingdom no mere pedestrian ever penetrated. Everything those basilisk eyes rest upon is suddenly painted white; wherever they peer a frozen shape congeals out of the void; and the result is that you seem to enter the night by another gateway and scud through an unexplored series of nocturnal corridors. You may have slept with Stevenson *à la belle étoile*; you may have spent a lifetime studying the moods of the darkness afoot; but you will find

Those piercing
head-lights

A NUMBER OF THINGS

A spectral
gang-plank

you are surveying a wholly unknown land when you range the stillness for the first time in a car.

The transformation begins with the very road. The vaguely glimmering track, along which the pedestrian softly fumbles, suddenly stiffens out into a harsh, blanched beam—a spectral gang-plank thrust out into the emptiness. The motorist's road is never mere dead macadam; by daylight, for instance, it leaps towards him like a twitching tide, a white lasso uncoiling as it comes. But at night its direction is reversed. It moves with you, seems a part of your machine; you seem to make it as you go. It is a desperate bridge across the blackness, and the moment one length is completed you leap along it—trusting to the invisible workmen at your prow to add another chalky length in time. And sometimes it seems as though they had failed to keep pace. The plank breaks off abruptly. You race to the ragged end of it—hang poised on the verge of the pit. And then just as you begin dreadfully to dip, the shaft leaps out once more, catches you neatly, and the convulsive improvisations recommence. The car has simply topped a little rise. As it gained the summit the lights, still canting upwards, searched the empty sky and left the down-grade unilluminated. That was all. And

MOTORING AT NIGHT

yet, though the consequent sudden snapping short of your visible track is probably the most familiar of the night-motorist's sensations, it is odd how long it takes to get quite habituated to it, and how deep an effect that little thrill has on the mood in which you drive.

In the centre
of a leprous
wreath

And when you have got accustomed to it there are any number of other thrills to take its place. You run for a time between hedgerows—and every dim bush seems to burst into a piece of branching coral; you might be sitting in a submarine. The hedges are followed by trees, by a long drawn avenue, the boughs meeting overhead; and now, with the light from your lamps shattering against a complete arc of obstacles, your plank across space is suddenly converted into a snow-white tunnel boring through it. Of all that exists outside that frozen circle you are as unaware as a traveller in a London tube. Straight trunks and spreading branches become as unthinkable to you as the overhead traffic is to him. You live in a circular world, in the centre of a leprous wreath. Oaks, elms, and beeches all part with their identity and submit to be woven into this haunting hoop—as white as a hoop of hawthorn. It always seems the same wreath. It quivers and fluctuates, making a weak rustle as it shivers;

A NUMBER OF THINGS

As fantastic as
a fairy-tale

but it never falls back. With nothing to measure your pace by, all sense of motion disappears. You seem to sit in a kind of numb trance with nothing but the drone of your engine and the whisper of this mesmeric arch. Perhaps you are not altogether unrelieved when it is wrenched aside and tossed behind, and you are out on your naked gang-plank once more with the stars tumbling and twirling overhead.

But before you finally desert the woodlands there is one other experience that must on no account be missed. The place of places for it, in England, is the New Forest—that strange double kingdom where you can plunge beneath the bright skin of the earth and dart to and fro in the dim quiet as though wandering about a vast sea-floor. By daylight it is odd enough, but in the darkness it is as fantastic as a fairy-tale. High above your head you can hear the night wind churning the green surf; but all about you is nothing but an ivory stillness, the hushed white coral and continuous chalky caves. Stealing down these corridors you detect low archways cut in the fretted walls. They are the entrances to the narrower rides that dip still more deeply into the secret places of the woods. Shutting down your speed to a crawl, you slip through one of these wickets. It fulfils its pro-

MOTORING AT NIGHT

mise. For now, in this narrower way, the trees and branches crowd closely about you, and albescent shapes leap up in your very path. Blanched limbs twist and vanish. There is a constant coming and going, a peeping and withdrawing. The stillness seems full of a spectral tumult and stir. And to this there is added a queer trooping and flashing of colours,—tense, feverish colours, like those one sees in a dream. The acetylene glare at this close range conjures the strangest effects. Primroses come out sharp and bright, like flowers made of precious stones or enamels. Lichen has a snakish lustre. The fallen leaves are as bright as blood. You creep along this crimson trail, and the jewels are thrust at you out of the emptiness. You come to a glade, and the shapes withdraw. You stop your engine; there are sighs and rumours; it seems as though something had but that instant escaped. The eyes of the car rove round the walls of the glade, and wherever they peer great arches, white as marble, are silently born in the blackness. And sometimes, perhaps, they alight on a little rabbit transfixed by the stare; and the sight of this pale, still ghost of something you have always figured as specially nimble and warm and soft seems perfectly to complete the sense of sheer enchantment.

The sense
of sheer
enchantment

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The wayward
night odours

Motoring by moonlight is very different. You travel more swiftly—though I doubt whether you travel so far. You never quite reach the border-line that divides the familiar from the phantasmal. There is none of those blanched abrupt births. The world is wider—a less partial lamp than yours expounds the pale beauty of the fields and spreads a moth-coloured carpet beneath the feet of the night. And as a result of the consequent release, the slackening of the optical tension, the other senses, I have noticed, acquire a new freshness and freedom. One grows peculiarly conscious, for example, of all the wayward night odours that slip out into the silver air at the summons of the dew.

The best type of country for moonlight work is open landscape with low ridges sustaining the roads, like some of the hill-spines near the Cotswolds, or those lean ribs and promontories that creep through the levels of the Midland hunting shires. This make of ground is good for many reasons—but chiefly because it gives you a pleasure impossible among actual mountains, or in densely-wooded country, or in land of unrelieved flatness; the singular pleasure, namely, of surveying a vast expanse of silent country when it lies below you dead asleep. The moon is like a lanthorn held above the face of the

MOTORING AT NIGHT

sleeper; and by its light you can see, far and near, the little hamlets cuddling unconsciously round their broodingspires; and a town or two, maybe, and unsuspected farms in sly recesses, seeming now to show a light, and now to hide it; and the soft, small thread of brightness, quivering through the stillness, which is the midnight mail to the North. There is something strangely moving in the spectacle. It is as though you had caught the country unawares—and had found it much simpler and more innocent than you knew. And it is a realisation reserved for the motorist. Some part of it may be gained by the pedestrian, but not the best of it. He cannot taste the very essence of the situation—that sense of almost god-like detachment. He cannot swoop easily from point to point, with the calm surveillance of a bird. He is part of the landscape, bound up with its dreams; and we all know how the cold moon-stuff seems actually to clog the limbs of the walker as though it were really a web. It is an odd fact, too, that the very noise of one's car helps to complete the effect of aloofness. Foot-steps bruise the face of the night, clumsily soiling the silence. But the drumming of your engine simply serves to cut you off the more completely from the dreaming earth. You seem to

Cut off completely from the dreaming earth

A NUMBER OF THINGS

A place of light
and laughter

sway suspended in a net of sound.

Your ride is over—you head once more for home—but even now your car has yet another secret to disclose. It is, perhaps, the most precious of all. For to race through the silver silence towards the upcast glow of a city is to perceive, as one has never done before, the true relation of that distant congeries to the empty spaces all about. The townsman's modern passion for the country is a splendid and a wholesome thing; but perhaps it warps certain deeper ideals, blurring the town's true purport, printing it on the mind as a sad and smoky stain. There is nothing like a night-ride home in a car to reform that strained conception. The distant glow seems the glow of a hearth; it is as a place of light and laughter and companionship, as a snug refuge from the aching fields, that the city is once more imaged in the mind.

No other manner of approach, unless by ship from the outer darkness of the sea, can give you nowadays this reassuring and inestimable thrill. The pedestrian may see the glow from afar—but the straggling suburbs spoil his vision long before he gains the city's heart; and to travel by train is to be flung into the centre without having been once aware of that hospitable beacon and sign. It sounds odd, no doubt, but

MOTORING AT NIGHT

it is certainly true, that it is only in a swift modern car that one can regain the old mediæval temper, and see the town once more as the traveller in old days would see it—a kind of courageous citadel, a gallant outpost, the appointed rallying-place for beauty and romance.

As the traveller
in old days
would see it

VI WHITE MAGIC



WHITE MAGIC

A SINGLE night of south-west wind swept away all that exquisite fabric of silver which had clung to the earth, like a veil of reluctant moonlight, in spite of the red-faced anger of the suns of Saturday and Sunday; and it was upon shrubberies no longer carved out of white marble, upon branches and leaves no longer like fretted chalcedony, that we looked out yesterday morning through our unfrosted windows. But although the hoar itself had disappeared, it has not been without its effect. Boughs may be black once more and rhododendron leaves a shabby, shiny green; but we see them now (or ought to do) with a far alerter eye. The pleasant old child fancy which figured Jack Frost as a delicate artist, pencilling our panes with silver seaweed and fantastic grottoes of fern, is capable of a much wider and deeper application. For it is the true artist's business not only to hang a curtain of delightful fancies between us and the outer world, but also to show us that world more clearly than ever before—revealing its true beauty, disclosing its real romance, pointing out the graces we had grown too dull and habituated to remark for ourselves. And that, very exactly, is what the unusually assiduous efforts of the frost offered to do for us the other day. Its silver, unlike the silver of

A veil of
reluctant
moonlight

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The beauty
of common,
unregarded
things

mere snow, never transforms shapes or alters outlines; it simply makes them apparent. Tracing them with a pre-Raphaelite exactitude, altering nothing, it shows us, with an insistent veracity, the delicate shapes of the leaves, the slim curves of the grass blades, the wonderful patterns in the woven hedge, the exquisitely continuous flow of the line that runs through beech trunk to branch, through branch to twig, and through twig to the clear whorls and spirals of the last elusive tendrils; and we realise, with a shock of delight, the amazing beauty of these common, unregarded things. The purity of the colour seems to rinse the senses, much as the cold air bathes and invigorates the mind. We see the world afresh; and we find it very good. The very lines of the roof tops, sharply recalled to our eyes by this argent enamel, have a new significance and charm: they cut cleanly across the sky, they rise and fall in a fair variety, and here and there the slim bunches of the chimneys-stacks make a pleasant emphasis. Nothing, we begin to realise, is too common or unclean for beauty, if only we had eyes to see.

And the effect of that realisation still lingers even when the picture itself has vanished. Consciously, or unconsciously, we begin to grow perceptive. The memory of the vision remains, and

WHITE MAGIC

the alertness which it brought loiters with it. The hawthorn boughs that were plaited silver yesterday are plaited ebony to-day; but the beautiful intricacy of their pattern is no less wonderful for that; and the delicate lines up-thrown by the birch-tree at the garden foot are not to be disregarded because its sharp whiteness has changed to a glimmering pearl-grey. It were an act of folly to receive the reversal otherwise; for to learn to accept it thus heartily is surely to acquire one of the most profitable of earthly tricks. It is to make the pleasure of the moment that has passed a servant to the pleasure of the moment that is here; and that is clearly to re-apply one of the oldest and soundest of life's lessons. Periodicity rules all things: tides and seasons and tempers, the pangs of maternity and the prosperities of nations. Let us, then, acquire the habit of suiting ourselves to the pendulum. Lashed to the huge See-saw of circumstance—now flung high and now low—now tasting the clear airs of winter and now the coloured heats of summer—the wise man is certainly he who knows how to win savour from the contrasts. He will enjoy the day the more deeply because of the passion with which he loves the night; he will live for the moment with all the abandon of a savage and yet be storing up rich

Suiting
ourselves to
the pendulum

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Because of mad
inconstancy

treasure for the morrow. He will make his joy in life the more constant and serene because of the mad inconstancy of his pleasures. He will find an abiding glamour in the thaw because he wishes the frost might last for ever.

VII SILVER &
GOLD

SILVER AND GOLD

EVERY really honourable suburban garden is brisk and heartsome just now with splashes, and loops, and circlets of fine gold—the gold of that king-cup-coloured flower which the wise Ruskin so solemnly rebuked Wendell Holmes for calling ‘the spendthrift crocus.’ ‘The crocus is not a spendthrift,’ pointed out the great man, ‘it is a hardy plant.’ Hardihood and prodigality then—are they so incompatible? One fancies not; the argument, one imagines, would not be over-difficult to confute; certain spendthrifts of the human sort, at any rate—but there! Why hound a quarry of so obvious a tameness? Ill-judged or well, Pathetic Fallacy or no Pathetic Fallacy, the adjective remains—proving its pertinence by its pertinacity. And, in spite of Ruskin, it is always with a fine air of thriftlessness that these sunny, saffron-coated prodigals come strutting through the close-fisted shrubberies of March. They swing up the niggard borders, they surround the frugal lawns, they march about the miserly, reluctant beds—always with the same consistent recklessness. And with it all, of course (it is their irresistible quality), they never stoop to impudence. Despite their bold defiance of the conventions, they are something better than your mere Bohemian. Their improprieties are done decor-

In spite of
Ruskin

A NUMBER OF THINGS

A very proper
marriage

ously; their prodigalities are never dissolute. They outspace Spring, they fling their largesse in Winter's very face; but their audacity is always douce and kenspeckle, they are never too hot-footed to betrim. Neatly aligned, well-groomed and orderly, they are, of all prodigals, surely the most circumspect and sober.

So much the quainter, of course, appears, on that account, their alliance with that shrinking epitome of wild wood-gracefulness, the snow-drop. The crocus is respectably audacious—bold, but bourgeois; and he mates—a frightened nymph! And yet it is a very proper marriage, as complementary as their colours—gold and silver; or as their symbols—the sun and the moon. Between them they make up the perfect round, the full, fair sequence of garden qualities. For the perfect garden should have room for all the crocus elements—the qualities of symmetry and bright composure and a generous massing of rich and heartsome colours; but it must not be wholly content with these. It must include as well the frailer snowdrop qualities—the qualities of wild grace and moon-dawn frailty. 'I wish it were to be framed as much as may be to a natural wildness,' said the good Bacon. 'Trees I would have none in it, but some thickets made only of sweetbriar and honeysuckle, and

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SILVER AND GOLD

some wild vine amongst; and the ground set with violets, strawberries, and primroses; for these are sweet, and prosper in the shade; and these to be in the heath here and there, not in any order.' In that corner, too, would grow the snowdrops; and for that corner, for the inclusion of that space of desirable disorder, in all our gardens, the snowdrop's appearance just now may be regarded as a kind of delicate appeal. And since, as Bacon says, 'God Almighty first planted a garden; and, indeed, it is the purest of human pleasures; it is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man; without which buildings and palaces are but gross handiworks'—since all this still remains admirably true, let the silver and gold scattered so lavishly about our gardens at the moment symbolise one other thing as well. Let them be symbols of the lavish assiduity with which we townsfolk, through the coming year, will polish each his link in the long gold and silver chain of gardens, which unites us, here in the smoke-drift, with the clean world of Nature lying outside the walls.

Polish each
his link

VIII THE
DOODLE DOO



THE DOODLE DOO

IN a very little book which has just been published an anonymous thinker tackles a very big problem—one of the most leaden and inveterate, indeed, of all the problems that go to make up the burden of the mystery of things: the problem that crouches hideously on every pillow in the world, that fouls every dawn with its presence, that robs sleep of half its virtue, and makes midnight festivals, be they never so innocent, mere hollow mockeries and gawds. We refer, of course, to the problem of Getting Up. We all have to get up; we all have to get up every day; and it is to a renewed consideration of that appalling and inevitable diurnal agony that the writer of this little book invites his readers. Invites them, too, in the most uncompromising fashion. Witness his rich title, *The Early Bird*: a title whose deep allusiveness not the most phlegmatic of readers will be able to resist. Witness, again, the piece of poignant symbolism appended to the title, which makes his dolorous subject-matter superlatively plain: a striking and convincing representation of a Crowing Cock. Could any more fitting or impressive emblem have been utilised? Mr. Barrie, that fine mystic and philosopher, knew its puissance when he used it with such grim effect in his great symbolical tragedy of *Peter Pan*. He

A problem
leaden and
inveterate

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Because the
farmer does

desired, the reader will recollect, to crush that defiant and blood-boltered miscreant Hook beneath the weight of some intolerable doom, and he could think of no more powerful engine than the dreadful long-drawn cry of the Doodle Doo.

But while it is with imaginations of this high order that our author's title-page inclines us to associate him, the book that follows ranks him, as a philosopher, on a vastly inferior level. For he is one of those self-mortifying fanatics who believe that to tighten bonds is to lighten burdens, that to intensify the agony is to minimise the hurt, that the solution of this great Problem of Getting Up is—to get up earlier! Turning the pages with a fluttering eagerness, hoping against hope that here at last may be some way of escape from the diurnal agony, what does the reader descry? He descries, written again and again in flaring majuscules, the astounding phrase, 'Rise In Summer At Five, In Winter At Six.' In the name of Morpheus, what phantasy is this? Why should we scourge ourselves thus gratuitously? Because, responds the author proudly, because the farmer does. But we—we are not Farmers; we are civilians—merchants, chemists, numismatists, office-boys; why should we fling aside the resources of our hardly-won civilisation—the 8.30 express, the swift electric

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THE DOODLE DOO

car—in order to vie with some thrice miserable bucolics? Because the sparrows twitter and the starlings pipe at five o'clock in summer, urges our friend. Are we, then, to be hounded into flagellation by a lot of gibbering birds? But it is better for your health, he runs on. 'Tis a retort that smacks of foolishness. Since when was health to be captured by curtailing sleep? What has become of all our 'Nature's sweet restorer' beliefs? But you must make the sleep up the night before, he protests; and there, we think, we have him on the hip.

We have him
on the hip

For why should one deliberately squander a couple of hours of fireside domesticity, of earnest study, of friendly intercourse, of patronage of the English Drama, for the sake of strolling emptily about an unwarmed garden, or crouching drearily over an ash-filled grate, an hour and a half before breakfast announces the true beginning of the day? There are only two possible answers. Of these, one is 'O vanitas, O mores.' It is probably sheer vanity, colossal and detestable egotism, that induces you, Mr. Anonymous Self-Mortifier, to make that aimless pilgrimage among a lot of unintelligent sparrows. You hope, secretly, that your neighbour's blind may suddenly run up, that your neighbour may be consumed with admiration for your extraordinary

A NUMBER OF THINGS

You would
steal a march

energy. The night before, no doubt, when you were stealing stodgily to bed, he was busy among his friends, playing his due, sociable part, pursuing some course of study, benefiting the world by writing articles on Doodle Doos. You shirked these things; you stole hoggishly to bed; and now, since you have failed to achieve a legitimate distinction, you hope to become adventitiously distinctive. You would steal a march on your fellows; and that, a march without a goal. And if you protest that you have a goal you simply take refuge in the other answer, the deplorable argument which the vulgar believe they finely enforce when they say that 'the early bird catches the worm.' It is an argument whose essential baseness is easily disclosed. For the man who goes out into the world with that motto in his head, goes out with the deliberate intention of shirking his first duty as a worker. He goes out determined not to make something, but to take something. He is not going to create, he is going to appropriate. He is not going to rely on a just reward for his own personal capacities; he is going to get up before Justice is awakened, and while the world's back is turned to him, and steal, not only a march, but everything unguarded that his march may lead him to. He is a tramp; and all tramps are lazy. And

THE DOODLE DOO

the mark and measure of his secret and essential laziness is the fact that he gets up a stealthy hour and a half before his fellows. His essential laziness

IX A REAL RIVER

A REAL RIVER

THERE is often a richer poetry in single words than in all the elaborate verses they are built into;—and to remember that a ‘river’ is that which *rives* is to catch a thrill and a vision that grant the heart a purer medicine than all the songs about brooks in our tongue. Born, as it has chanced, with scarcely an exception, within the windings of lush, inactive streams, our poets have taught us a tradition which it would be well if some new Drayton could destroy. From Spenser’s to Patmore’s the streams that glide through English verse, producing pretty metaphors that turn to thoughts when plucked, have been copied, every one, from the curves of Thames or Avon, Cam or Isis, or from the sleek and drowsy reaches of the Ouse; and it is by their slow lapse accordingly that all our conceptions have been moulded, it is of them that we inevitably think when we see the bright word ‘river’ written down. For us the perfect river is a blend of Tennyson’s ‘Brook’ and Bablockhithe. It is a place of backwaters and slow bubbles and dim weirs. It laps and it laves; it prattles and purls; it makes sweet music on the enamelled stones. It is the drone in the hive, a silver hem to the landscape: a charming adjunct, nothing more, to the genuine machinery of nature. In essence an over-

A ‘river’ is
that which
rives

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Older than the
mountains

flow, a mere drowsy residue, it seems to mark the smiling end of nature's efforts. It is an arcadian interlude, a space of leisure and mirage, the slumbrous seventh day among the elements. Nothing endures here but reflections, purpose comes to a sweet pause. Every river is a lovelier Lethe. . . .

Now this is not only wrong—it is ruinously wrong. It may seem a slight thing, a mere matter of sentiment—yet to think of our rivers in this way is to rob ourselves of some singular services and to twist and distort, at its very taproot, that broad conception of the countryside, of its logical structure and its strong continuous life, which it ought to be every man's first business to acquire. Far from being a tame attendant on the hills, winding where they magnificently allow, the river is their controller and creator, carving them out of the dead plain; and instead of being unstable it is the most stubborn and enduring of all the forces of the earth. Peel back the skin of culture that has altered every other feature of England, turning her moors into fat meadowland and painting her marches with the gold of corn: cut deeper than history itself: and you will still find these ineradicable grooves. They make a pattern that has proved impervious to change. Older than the mountains

A REAL RIVER

which they mirror, less capricious than the very outline of our coasts, these flimsy and elusive veins are the real girders of the country, the silver skeleton round which the rest is built. The fields that seem to nourish them so tolerantly are in reality but the great green leaves that cling and pass and change on the branches of this unchanging tree. Your loiterer is the real lord of the land: it dominates, administers, divides. View it coldly, scientifically, and you see it at once as the arrowy focus and determination of the scattered forces of the sky, the blade of the wandering storms and tempests: a kind of liquid lightning. These it applies, as neatly as a sculptor working marble, to the clefts and fissures where the running strokes will tell, unprisoning the buried dumb design. So that to listen to what the poets call its 'prattle' is actually to hear the chisels of heaven playing ringingly on the fabric of the earth. . . . A good thought for the mind to contain.

Real girders of
the country

But before the mind can possess it, before we can rightly realise all it stands for and entails, something more sensible than science is needed, something more moving than words: we need the ardour of the actual event. And it is just here, if a Scotsman may say so without discourtesy, that your sumptuous English rivers seem

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Thames is too
long—too
short

to fail. They are august, they are opulent; they have made history, they divide counties, they reflect brave towns; and when at length they meet the sea, among your fleets and flags and watching cities, they swing forward, down your estuaries as though to music, magnificent as some high festival. But it is not its opulence nor its spacious tides that tell of a river's true powers; and you might trace the full course of the Thames, from that hushed crystal cradle away up in the Cotswolds down to its grave apotheosis by the Nore, and yet learn almost nothing of the special river-wisdom we speak of now. Thames is too long, for one thing—too short, for another. Too short, because it does not begin far enough back, because it is swaddled at its very birth deep among the meadows we ought to see it weaving, its strength disguised by the robes its strength has won;—too long, because a ten-day march is too much for the memory: one loses links: one infallibly misses, for example, what is certainly the supreme sensation of its course—the recognition that the smooth mellow vale (five miles wide, ten miles long, six hundred feet deep) through which you wander between Wallingford and Reading, is purely the river's work, a slow slice drawn down through the chalk, changing the first featureless

A REAL RIVER

plateau into the various façades which you see, actually calling up, like a cardinal a congregation, the billows of the Chilterns on your left hand, the rising ridges of the Berkshire Downs on your right. . . . No;—what is needed is something both abrupter and completer: a river that leaps through its octave in a little score of miles: a river, that is, pouring through a land so primitive and yet so progressive that the shaggy hills of its birth, untouched since the prime, are within an easy day's march of a suave sea-board set with cities, with civilisation at ease among ripe plains.

Something
both abrupter
and completer

And so far as I know there is only one corner of the island where this special kind of curt completeness can be found; and that is the dour, indomitable region that stretches north from Solway—a land (the birthplace of Carlyle) that is as lean and forthright as the Lutheran race it breeds—breaking at once into wild moor, softening at a touch into sweetness, as averse to dissimulation as its sons: a land where every feature still preserves its prime intention, and where rivers rive indeed.

And it is with one of the rivers of that land, and of a river that I know most strangely well, that we are here concerned.

You begin, then, on the bare breast of Queens-

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Out of obscure
pockets in the
soil

berry, a land of matted heather and cold moor, where nothing greets the first cry of the young stream but the desperate sough of the wind among the bents. Out of obscure pockets in the soil, out of secret crevices and springs, the little stream, the new power, summons sweet resources; its voice soon rises to a brisk command—a blithe tune that puts new heart into the listener, that instils the day with a design. The path down which the voice flies, ringing like an elvish slogan, glitters like a live thing through the heather, and becomes at once the native centre of the scene. And even as it runs it deepens and adorns it, fledges it with fern and moss, makes the rut a glen—and there in an instant, bright with rowan-berry crimson and glad green, you come upon your first tree. A tree? It is a banner in the waste, a symbol of success, the ensign of the silver power that you are going to see conquering and civilising the waste; and beneath it, for a further sign, lies the first deep pool. No common pool, this honey-coloured marvel. Carved like a chalice, it presents you with a miracle: nothing less than the life of the river re-embodied—its silver turned to solid scales, its brightness into watching eyes—its very fluency made physical: life strangely generated here on the dead moor: not less won-

A REAL RIVER

derful than manna: your first trout. Thenceforward, life multiplies apace. Like a mesh of silver cords flung across the aimless foot-hills the new burn and its flashing helpers tug the chaos into shape. System appears. The glen becomes a valley, the valley widens to a vale. The heavy hills circle humbly about and are ordered anew. Until at length, lured by the growing graciousness, the first adventurous farm-house appears—and there is the first phase completed.

The first phase
completed

The second stage is simpler. Gathering all these new-made miracles about it—these pools of living fish, these trees of scarlet fruit, these houses full of actual men and women—the river begins to multiply and expand them, crashing out a rising chorus as it works. The spare patches of grass become fields, trees file over the hill-tops and encamp in defensive clusters—huddled as though still conscious of something vaguely hostile in the air; and around the softer slopes new farms keep coming quietly, drawn by the spell of running water. It is one of the commonest of Lowland sights in reality, of course: just an upland dale thinly sprinkled with silent sheep-farms and beleaguered by the sombre moor; but to see it in this way, called into existence, out of the emptiness, by the voice of a stream, is to comprehend its character anew, realise it as a

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The beginning
of the third
phase

living thing, part of a great process, with a freehold in Time as well as Space.

The beginning of the third phase, I always think, is exactly marked by the first bridge. A river's first bridge must always, I suppose, be definitive: it means the first road, for one thing, an entry into another age; and certainly to look up-stream and down-stream from this bridge is to look into two different epochs. This third space, to my mind, is the loveliest of all, the most hallowed and secret: it is a queer, aching pleasure to me to recall the enchantments it pre-ludes. The moment it is sealed by the shadow of this brig, my burn drops dumb. At the same second the banks break into cry. It was the land that was mute before, the river that laboured and rang. Now it is the river that broods darkly and the land that flutters and thrills. Never was there such a place for birdsong as the next two bowery miles of water-meadowland: never such a paradise for mavis and merles, for linnets and lav-erocks and yorlings green and gold. Kneaded and doctored so diligently, silted and renewed, the soil is as rich as red cream, and life seems to ooze out of it almost monstrously, escaping at a touch. It bursts up in the brittle bubbles of flowers and the heavy draped fantasy of trees: it has a tropical richness, almost uncanny: wher-

80

A REAL RIVER

ever you turn something moves. You approach a heap of grey stones in the grass; and one of them goes lolloping away. You watch a sudden wind stripping old leaves from a tree;—and one of them halts in mid-flight, sways⁷ easily back, perches and breaks into song. To walk there alone, in the untrammelled exuberance, with the royal oaks and beeches parading and surrounding you with tier on tier of watching forms, is to feel as though the soil, so pampered and protected, had at length passed beyond the ordered limits of earth's energy, and acquired forbidden powers. It is the absence of all human intervention, no doubt, that induces this sense of the unauthorised. Here is ripeness with no reapers; a park without a house: nature, abandoned to her own beauty, surging up beyond the outlets commonly cut by axe and scythe. It is Eden before Adam.

But nature's hour is at hand. Slowly, as you press more deeply onward, along the banks of the watchful brooding stream, you become aware, subconsciously at first, of the gradual growth of a new sound in the midst of the voices all about you, as though, one by one, their flutings and their carollings were being sucked into a simple central drumming drone. And even as this rising chord comes home to you, thrum-

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The long fifth
'phase

ming through the air an urgent bass, over the peak of the hill, as if in answer to the summons, a white road whips and flashes, cleaves a slanting gash downward through the trees, makes straight for the source of the sound. With that, you too, rounding a last bend, come within sight of the invader. There, among its weirs and sluices, crouching greyly by the water's edge, old Adamson's saw-mill stands, sounding what is indeed a summons to surrender. This vast hum is the voice of the stream, giving tongue triumphantly at last. It has conjured the earth and cozened it, prevailed on it to heap up forests and flowers; and now, bringing man to its aid, it leads an attack on the riches, hews the woods down and hacks them into beams. That white road is an arm stretched from civilisation and the south. And into its grasp the river flings its plunder, working undisguised, with a furious eagerness, among its wheels, to provide man with palisades and buttresses and roof-trees and all the apparatus of concerted life.

Thenceforward there is no concealment, and through the long fifth phase which the drone of the mill-wheel heralds (as though it held an eternal echo of the traffic of the far-off towns it serves) the roads hurry back and forth, the bridges leap, the buildings of the world proceed a-

A REAL RIVER

pace. I would I had space to speak with fulness of the details of this last resounding phase. To see it pass with swiftness is to feel, beyond forgetting, that the branching river is indeed a silver stem, visibly breaking into flower. You look back to the dark hills whence you have come; you mark the clustered towns that now, towards evening, begin to blossom into gold all down the plain. You compare the numb dead moor with this glittering result, this Igdrasil, this silver tree, laden with living gold; and it may well seem to you, in your exultation, that you have beheld all history unfolding, that you have been watching the flowering of a world. Nor, indeed, is it wholly an illusion. Immune from mortality, exempt from the corruption of the clay, these paths of shining water, the chosen footways for the elements, do play the part of bridges suspended out of reach of Time. Time floods past them and changes the earth, but they remain through it all undisturbed. They are the solitary stable footholds in a melting world;—and from them, as from a lofty lattice, we can look divinely down, and watch the land swing through its phases, from the prime.

You have beheld all history unfolding

X THE WINDS

THE WINDS

THE winds are up once more—it is the hour of their ultimate exhortation. Out of the desert places of the sky they come, fierce with ecstasy, rebuking the body of an earth too prone to splendour, preaching deprivation and the scourge. Plumes are broken and cloaks of colour rent. Standing on a little hill this morning, I saw an indolent, proud landscape, perhaps the softest in England, suddenly stripped by the invisible hands, and the new nakedness flogged across and across by lank grey ropes of rain. It is the hour of purgation, of penance—and the nimble conscience of the earth, the mind of man, may not escape the shriving. It sees the logic of the flesh everywhere challenged and the symbols of success discomfited. Fat fruits, whose colour seemed a kind of holiness, whose succulence cosseted the eye, feeding it with a sense of finality, are suddenly turned into groping aspirants fumbling for salvation in the mire. The barren jewels on the hedgerows too, the sterile rubies and beryls and jet, are twisted from their places and tossed into the mud to breed. The last is made first, the fruit becomes seed. It is these bitter days of autumn, not the amiable hours of spring, that form the true seed-time of the world. These destroying winds are really cre-

The hour of
purgation

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The account-
ants of the air

ators, sowing while they seem to slay.

We misjudge the winds. We do not understand them. They follow a code too unsubstantial for our sight. We call them, for example, capricious, whereas their movements have an august equity and precision which make the stolid seesaw of the tides seem cumbrous and approximate. They are the accountants of the air, their purpose is pure justice, they rectify disparities, and cease. Again, we call them noisy, whereas, of all the elements, the winds alone are dumb. Fire mutters and croons, water has its numberless dialects, the earth has as many cries as colours, from the rustle of a leaf to an earthquake's clang. But the winds are magnificently mute. In their own kingdom, scouring the fields of space, they plunge and countermarch and range in the midst of an immaculate hush. That impetuous peace—that exultant onset and whirl unstained by the tiniest sound—is a thing that the imagination, with its passion for purities, contemplates with a curious joy. But it is a joy that the body can never hope to share. It may climb high, leave the earth behind, reduce its foothold to the merest crumb of crag, but it carries the blight in its tissues, and the senses destroy the stillness they so much desire. Noise is an infirmity of the flesh. It is when the winds

THE WINDS

break upon the beaches of the world that the cry goes up. The entrance of this strange figure, finger on lip, is the signal for a universal outcry. The earth-bound elements give tongue like jealous hounds watching the serene uprising of some great white bird. It is the body breaking into speech at the burning touch of the spirit.

The signal for
a universal
outcry

For man, too, responds, and lifts up his voice at the advent. His speech (which is but woven wind) is full of tributes to the tyrant; and he may never speak of that 'spirit,' nor pray for inspiration, without ceremoniously saluting this silent emperor of sound. The poet who said

I had walked on at the wind's will;

I sat now, for the wind was still,

might have been speaking in the name of Poetry herself, for there is nothing like a tempest for filling the sails of the imagination. It is the begetter of song as well as its supporting spirit, and after coursing through the veins of verse, uplifting the light, intricate branches, it often flames out frankly in actual emblem and imagery—blossom and fruit as well as sap and seed. A hundred poets beside Herrick have seen it as a solvent of Space, a bridge between lover and beloved; a hundred more, beside Shelley, conceived it as 'the trumpet of a prophecy'

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The winds have
never altered

summoning the walls of Time to surrender. And indeed it has ended by becoming somewhat strangely like both these. Interwoven with so many symbols, pouring through the world's imagination so continuously, it has now become a kind of whispering gallery through the years; and to put the mind's ear to it attentively is to become aware of the strangest chorus—rumours of old wars, flute-notes and laments, wrecks, judgments and rejoicings. Unlike the sea, whose character varies with its coasts, and unlike the fire and the clay, which we have moulded and tamed into new creatures, the winds have never altered; they will stalk through the shining cities of the future just as they strode above the morasses of the prime, and shaggy fears as well as an exultant confidence are shaken from their wings as they pass. Their code, which we have not yet grasped, and their strength, which we may never measure, have always placed them outside the knowledgeable forces and given them an enduring kinship with the incomprehensible and divine.

Many others beside the dreamers know and acknowledge their compelling power. Upon the lips of most of us the winds lay the same sweet torture for expression. Something awakens at the touch, and stirs and cries, and stretch-

THE WINDS

es out weak hands as the invisible robes sweep by. I once knew a bank cashier—a small, sleek man with meagre eyes and a complacent chin. His voice was fleshy, youth was dead in him, and he had gained no wisdom—gained nothing save a little dingy prudence. Yet the wind was too strong even for him. I found him, one wild November night, wandering bareheaded round the railings of a city park. Behind the barriers, in the darkness, you could hear the trees straining and roaring round the knees of the wind, as wild beasts do when their keeper moves among them. And my friend confessed to me shamefacedly, lest I should suspect him of some worse weakness, that it was this elemental music that brought him out of doors. I know a woman too, a farmer's wife in Cumberland—childless, prim, economical,—who cannot rest within walls when the winds are abroad on the hills. They might be young lovers wandering passionately there, entreating her to join them. For years now, when the winds are up, she has laid her knitting aside, wrapped herself in a shawl, and gone out to meet them, to submit her body to their mad embraces. She too goes where there are trees—partly, I think, to make the wind more tangible, a fellow-inmate, to rob it of some of its terrifying godlike greatness. There is certainly

A bank cashier

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The winds are
up once more

something in the communion that nurtures her profoundly. She returns enhanced and sweetened. Her husband—amused at first, then angry, then contemptuous—now accepts the habit stolidly, with a kind of pathetic patience. He is sometimes the first to move, setting his pipe aside, fetching her plaid shawl from its peg, and helping her on with it impassively. He watches her go out into the blind tumult, and then turns back to the fire to smoke solemnly until she returns. He is a good fellow.

She will be going out to-night, and so will that bank cashier. The winds are up once more, and on bare hillsides and in the hooded hearts of cities there will be the same furtive going and coming, the same dark human stir and unrest. Old barriers go down before the onrush, long-parted emotions draw suddenly together again, whilst aboriginal fears dimly invade the suburbs. Yes, the winds are the great accountants; they rectify and adjust. They dissolve the trim partitions and pluck us out of Space and Time. They break, but they beget. They flagellate and heal. They humiliate and exalt.

XI A WHITE
CHRISTMAS

A WHITE CHRISTMAS

I AM one of those who give their almanac a more grave regard than is common, following its precepts with some seriousness, striving always to create a kind of harmony between the deed and the day ; for I believe that the poorest human happenings take on a new significance when we bring them into accord with the greater happenings, the more magnificent processions, of the Times and Seasons. There are unmeasured forces at work in the midst of us, and the moon, I know, orders the tides of our dreams, both waking and sleeping, as profoundly as she orders the far less wonderful tides of the outer seas. I could desire that our share in the great organism might become deliberate and formal. I could desire each notable day of the year to bring its especial human ritual. And so, just as I hope to spend my May mornings in one particular manner, my midsummer days in another ; just as I think no New Year's dawn should pass without being watched from some especial hill-top ; so, too, I like to usher in the time of Christmas with some experience of frost and snow—arousing the old memories to a finer wakefulness by the use of the elements which have been so long regarded as their natural symbols—granting the old celebration a new

Of harmony
between the
deed and the
day

A NUMBER OF THINGS

In the wake
of a splendid
snowstorm

solemnity and glee.

That is why, or that is partly why, I do this piece of writing in the wake of a splendid snowstorm. A moment since and I was in the furious heart of it, and now it is moving, a grey and silent presence, along the face of the crags that curve towards the south and the sea. I am sitting on the highest piece of human masonry in Lancashire, on the Cairn that marks the summit of Conistone Old Man, and all about me the great peaks heave up, scribbling their fierce, white messages across a sky as tender and stainless as a sky of spring. The sunlight is calm and simple, and beneath it the great austerity of the earth consents to show vague hints of opal-red and opal-blue—fugitive, virginal colours that flicker and elude, but still remain. It is a strange England, this that I look down upon—an England how much more magnificent, how much more terrible, and yet how much less menacing than the black and roaring England I left behind me at Tithebarn Street so brief a while ago.

Not that I found frost and snow immediately. Between the blackness and the whiteness there spread a space of time when a grey mist forbade the sky and changed the valleys and the woods and the hills to a series of intimate chambers, no larger than a boudoir, through which one

A WHITE CHRISTMAS

passed in a great unbroken loneliness. Nor was this (as you may think) wholly displeasing to me, for at the back of my desertion of the town there lay one other reason than that longing for a Christmas hung with some of the whiteness of old days. I had tired of talk and of the coteries, I had grown sick of books and writing, the busy and various town seemed suddenly impossible, and the thought had come to me that, just at this thin moment of the year the deserted valleys and the withered fells, the empty woods and the gaunt voices of the black December streams might be as a curtain that has worn transparent, and that the things we are all, consciously or unconsciously, searching for among the hills and fields of summer might at last be really discoverable now that the draperies and rich disguises of summer had been flung away. It is always, I reminded myself, it is always where there is nakedness and emptiness that the final truths are told. And so these isolating walls of mist, severing me so finally from the friendly modes of men, were far from being unwelcome.

Now, I thought as I penetrated farther and farther into that endless labyrinth of deserted rooms—now, if ever, the great secrets which external Nature seems always on the point of revealing will be at last laid bare. Everything,

Where the
final truths
are told

A NUMBER OF THINGS

A tonic transformation

indeed, within the brief circle of visible things of which I formed the centre did appear to take on a new value, a deeper momentousness. The grass-blades wove themselves to form a kind of rubric; the black and writhen stems of the heather seemed to build up into great hieroglyphs, entreating solution; the little balls of moisture on reed and stem were as the beads of a mystical rosary. And the things on the edge of that charmed circle, the things neither truly seen nor wholly blotted out—they, too, suffered a tonic transformation. They, too, loomed with a splendid portentousness. Looming thus one day, a great mass of rock took on, as I watched it, the fearsome aspect of some shaggy, slime-born beast. I could trace the huge ear case, the blunt snout and the nostrils, the vast and threatening horns; and as I traced these things the whole great bulk lurched into a horrible vitality. It began to move. For a moment my head swam and the whole hillside seemed to share this dreadful resurrection; and then the beast passed into the circle of things seen, and I beheld, with a great stound of thankfulness, my monster retransformed into a sheep.

To such purely physical circumstances as these are to be attributed, too, I suppose, the convictions of impending environments that

A WHITE CHRISTMAS

would now and then sweep irresistibly upon me. And yet at times it seemed to me that something but the moment before had actually appeared and beckoned and passed on, and I seemed to catch the echo of a whisper that had just sighed through the labyrinth; and it seemed to me that although I could no longer describe the presence, nor even rightly remember it, yet some secret part of me had seen and had remembered and had understood as well the message my ears had been too slow and sullen to receive. And at times, too, it seemed to me that I fell stupidly back on the very brink of knowledge, that I let the cup leave my lips before the draught was tasted, my fingers being too weak to support the burthen. One morning there is that I especially remember. I had been standing for a period on that scrap of sudden rockface which cries a harsh salute from amongst the grave regiments of trees which march down the lower slopes of Wansfell—a spot plebeian enough for the most part, and spread, in the summer, with a pleasant mixture of orange-peel and trippers. But on the morning of which I speak it seemed to have assumed the dignity and sanctity of a shrine: it seemed to hold itself in readiness for some tremendous celebration. I stood on the very lip of the crag, and

On the
very brink
of knowledge

A NUMBER OF THINGS

A monstrous
sound as of
groaning

it was as though I stood at the bow of a richly freighted ship plunging heavily forward into the unknown. The mist, densely packed, hemmed me resolutely in, reducing my foothold to the merest shred, filling me with the sense of ilimitable plains of empty air. And as I stood there confronting I knew not what, overhanging (as it seemed) nothing but a dreadful void, there arose, out of the very belly of the fog, a strange, heart-shaking clamour. . . . It was as though some great hand were beating slowly on a door of the bigness of a mountain-side; and when the beating ceased, and the door (as it would appear) had swung wide before that gigantic summons, there issued forth a monstrous sound as of groaning—a sound more dreadful and disheartening than any I had known. And with that a great terror laid its hand upon me, and I fled; nor was it long time before I found myself back on the main body of the mountain with the reassuring quiet of the trees about me. . . . You are at liberty to laugh; doubtless, as I have said, the thing is easily explicable, for mist (I am told) possesses strange acoustic properties, and can change and distort a sound as completely as it changed and distorted the aspect of the beast I have spoken of above; but none the less, not one of the fifty theories I contrived that day

A WHITE CHRISTMAS

could persuade me from the belief that I had sprung, not only from the verge of the cliff, but also from the brink of some great disclosure. And since all things are true that we believe to be true, I have set down the adventure as it happened.

The more
reasonable
conclusions

Other happenings I have witnessed, of an equal depth of mystery, among these passionate and lonely Yuletide hills: but they are, for the most part, both too personal and too extraverbal for relation here. Instead, I prefer to set out certain of the more reasonable conclusions at which I have been forced to arrive. I have learned, for one thing, that the great renaissance allotted by us townfolk to the Spring has already begun its progress through the woods and coppices: that the buds are already warm and ardent, that the thrill of the Vita Nuova is already published abroad. I have learned too that, even on the meagrest days, and even in the wildest places, there is nothing of that fierce emptiness, that desperate negation and bitterness, as of utter death, which we of the cities figure apprehensively as we glance, with a shudder in the winter time, outside our protecting walls. I have learned, on the contrary, that there is, in all the woods and down all the valleys, a beauty almost voluptuous. It is not of

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Night upon the
.. great white
peaks

the woods be-snowed that I now speak: for their almost unbearable loveliness is a thing that may be properly celebrated only in song; it is of the sun-warmed woods, when the snow slips away from the stems and the twigs, and leaves them moist and clean. They rise up then, the slim hazels, like an outburst of saluting swords; so that one halts to catch the cheer that follows their swirl; and they burn then, the grave-boled beeches, with a luminous green fire; and they cover the ground then, the oak-leaves and the beech-leaves, like the splintered fabric of some splendid sunset; and everywhere the mosses and the lichens and the fungi brush in their perfect complements: their staccato ecstasies of green. Autumn, by comparison, seems loose and slipshod, summer redundant almost to vulgarity. Spring alone can rival this elegance of hue, this acute nimbleness of colour.

One other thing I have learned, and that is the great unexpected friendliness which fills the snow-bound uplands after dusk. Last night I spent wholly upon the great white peaks, whose tense leaping against the silken sky is the chief fact in the world which surrounds me as I write. For the most part I spent it afoot, drinking in, with a great gusto, the tonic and spacious lucency. A rich plenitude of stars burned so ard-

A WHITE CHRISTMAS

ently that they seemed to threaten the snow with thaw; but the snow caught their light and held it, changing it to a luminous fabric that hung over the whole keen landscape like a silver phosphorescence. It was all very benevolent and tranquil, full of sweetness and soothing, and for a while, wrapped in my great-coat, I slept with a deep contentment. When I awoke the stars still splashed and quivered, and from the share of the heeling Plough a splendid furrow still sprang like a spume of gems. But it was already morning, for, when I passed over the brow of the hill, there, in the valley below me, I beheld the ochre lights of a farm.

I slept with
a deep
contentment

It was as I swung through the last fell gate that I came upon the farmer himself, bearing a great lanthorn. In the grave tones of men who speak in the midst of nocturnal silences, we gave and took our salutations. The snow muttered beneath our feet as we moved across the yard, the hinges sobbed as the heavy byre-door swung open, the soft light of the lanthorn washed broadly up and down as the farmer passed within. The warm smell of the beasts rose up gratefully; there was a coming and going of deep contented sounds—the equable breathing, the rustle of the fodder, the stirring of hooves. And as I stood there by the door-post—marking

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The Mass of
the Christ

these immemorial details, and marking, too, the white hills and the stars, and the pure nobility of the landscape: it seemed to me that at last my pilgrimage had received its final confirmation. For in that instant something that had long lain dormant in my blood stirred into life, and neither habit nor convention ruled me any more, and the Mass of the Christ became a deep and splendid actuality.

XII DAWN
ON BIDSTON HILL

DAWN ON BIDSTON HILL

THE coffee I had from the Stall was strong and of good savour; so that it was without overmuch depression that I began to outstep even the long last mile of the houses that march forever, silent and disconcerting as figures in a dream, from Birkenhead towards the Hill. Indeed, as I advanced, I began to discover a certain rightness in their companionship. Wan and meagre beneath the sorrowful moon, their silence was still the silence of intent listeners. It was full of solemnity, it braced and prepared me for my vigil. And as the light of the moon caught the windows, each in turn, it seemed as though my passing roused successive sleepers to a lit and watchful sympathy.

Between five
and six of the
morning

So, between five and six of the morning, I came out upon the Hoylake road at the point where it sways slightly northward before accepting the actual shadow of the Hill. The air had a smack of the soil, and, beneath that, a vague subtaste, sweet and pleasant to the palate, which I knew but could not name. Trees built up against the sky, and the white glimmer of the road was very different from the sly reflections of the lamplit pavements. I drew a deep breath. Out of the darkness on my right came the far-away crowing of a cock, faint but precise, like a signal; and immediately thereafter a delicate

A NUMBER OF THINGS

For omens and
signals

rain began to whisper across the fields. The whisper rose to a mutter, and as it rose the subtaste in the air grew stronger. I recognised it then, not without a thrill. It was the perfume of rain-soaked heather.

That wild, familiar odour—that glimpse too, of the softly-curving road disappearing among those dark trees—brought back to me out of the past, with a grateful freshness, this and that pleasant and pitiful happening. So that it was in a cloud of memories that I began, beneath the moist light of a moon besieged by land-faring clouds, to move up the slope of the Hill itself. One fingers one's memories, I think, as one might finger the beads of a rosary—less for their own sake than as counters, as a guide through the visionary states which they evoke. But it was not of retrospect, nor even for the dreams that retrospect has the power to awaken, that I had come to the Hill. It was for prospect, rather, for auguries, for omens and signals of the future. Out of the quiet hour that would precede the dawn of the New Year, and out of the very mode of the dawn itself, I hoped to gather something of guidance in the days that the dawn would prelude. And so, lest I should forget my purpose in a coil of dreams, there leaped out upon me, when I reached the summit, a sight that

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DAWN ON BIDSTON HILL

smote the beads I conjured with utterly out of mind. The three silent
presences

For as I turned and looked back over the way I had come, I discovered that the streets and the silent ways that had seemed so dark and desolate, were in reality boiling and bubbling with essential light. Those dim lamps among the stricken houses, which had seemed so pitiful, seemed now, massed and marshalled by the distance, to present a front of almost intolerable magnificence. Like half a hemisphere of fallen stars, they seemed to make the lowlands all their own.

To the bravery of that spectacle the loneliness of my own station contributed, doubtless, not a little; and yet I did not find that loneliness in the least diminished by the presence beneath me of those wide fields of flame. Rarely, indeed, had I felt more utterly alone. There were no stars; the moon, yielding at last to the clouds, had left the sky hopeless and forlorn, and the three silent presences on the hilltop—the Pharos, the Windmill, the domed Observatory—served only to increase the sense of isolation. For one was full of the tragedy that comes to all ruined and deserted things; and one belonged rather to the secret stars than to the world: and one spoke only to some nameless watcher,

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The colours
that cool
waters have

leagues away in the unfathomable night, beating up through the outer dark. These things, as I turned them over in my mind, brought me still more nearly into touch with immensities. I was utterly alone.

The dawn, when it came, was strangely, inappropriately, conventual and naïve. It began just before the clock struck seven, in a little white flurry of cloud, like a virginal bed, that hung precisely above the Bidston Water-tower; and it was there, for an hour, that the brightest stain of colour was to be found. Thence it passed northward and westward toward the sea, always sedately, always unfolding a pale-green riband as it moved. The colours were the colours that cool waters have when they creep quietly through dew-grey meadow-lands.

Beneath this innocent brightness, the lights that had seemed in the dark so many tense and clear-cut aspirants grew dissolute and sullen. Obscene fumes were about them as they lay, dull relics of the night, like embers in a dying grate. Like dying embers, too, they now began, one after one, to suffer their extinction.

And as they died away the city that had held them, passed, in their company, entirely out of vision. I looked down and beheld nothing but a dull fabric of mist and fume. It lay like a por-

DAWN ON BIDSTON HILL

tentous mantle, it seemed big with incalculable births, but it made no least confession of the presence of humanity. The sense of the city's nearness, so vividly with me through the night, now faded utterly away. It was the west that held me now, where the deliberate verge of the Flintshire heights rose up in the fine first luccency. They showed red-grey over the white mists that made a noiseless tumult above the Dee. On the hither side the fields were taking on their special hues: bronze, pale-green, purple, apple-red. Among them the reassuring farms grew plain and plainer, and over them began to waver a vague tissue woven of innumerable sounds. The comfortable tower of Oxtan Church announced itself. The great houses below the wood grew brisk and habitable with pleasant morning noises. But north and east, as often as I turned to it, the city still maintained its disturbing muteness and dread invisibility.

The consum-
mation of the
procession

It would be, I think, about the actual moment of the sunrise, that she made at last the movement for which I waited. The appearance of the sun itself, the real consummation of the virginal procession of peaceful colours, was, indeed, accomplished secretly, but a sudden wind from the sea, stronger than the steadfast winds

A NUMBER OF THINGS

This great city
of ours

of the night, seemed to break upon these dull, disquieting wrappings of fume and cloud. They stirred and moved, there was thinning and departing, the veil grew more transparent, and I saw our seaward-facing city, not indeed as we so often see it, a great incontinent flood of houses and pinnacles and spires, but rather as a vast concordant Being, thrilling with organic life, warm with unanimous desires. There was no detail visible, and to blend and harmonise became the whole duty of the vapours in the air. Of the mental and emotional effect of those labours I do not know how I can most aptly speak. Perhaps, if I say that I gained, at that moment, a far deeper understanding of the Civic Idea than I had ever been persuaded to before, I shall convey something of the nature of that high, irresistible appeal. I saw this great city of ours in a new and unforgettable fashion. She became a vital Personality. Suffused by the vague rose of the morning, surrounded by these enfolding mists, she seemed deeply and intimately feminine. She became something that one would work for, march for, suffer for—a wonderful Presence gazing steadfastly across the seas, to whom this new dawn, and the dawns it captained, were but as an obedient army to be used for her own far ends. . . .

DAWN ON BIDSTON HILL

The robins were awake in the woods as I plunged down again, and they and the birch-trees made a silver noise that echoed far and wide. A rich smell rose from the moist undergrowth, the wind stung my face and brought me the ardour of the sea. And across the fields, clear and certain in the morning air, came the voice of a man singing.

The voice of a
man singing

XIII THE
GLAMOUR OF
THE TOWN

GLAMOUR OF THE TOWN

I

IT cannot be disputed that there exists a widespread and (so far as can be ascertained) entirely undisputed notion that the modern city is essentially a thing of ugliness. You will find any number of folk bubbling over with eagerness to anathematise it for crudity, ill-taste, or forthright hideousness; but you will find not one anxious to defend it from such charges, or prepared to proclaim, on the contrary, its dignity, its charm, its surprising and many-featured beauty. The very man who grows regularly rhapsodical before the school-girlish pink and blue of the average sunset will fling mud (if not literally then by letter to *The Times*) at the more than sunset blaze of colour of the average street hoarding. No easels are planted before the intricate splendours of our Liverpool tramway termini: no enthusiast gloats over the stupendous purple banners that depend from our Vauxhall chimneys; nor, if our memory serves us well, have we ever been troubled by wild-eyed tourists demanding the precise spot whence the Bold Street panorama, or the lace-work of the dock-office scaffolding, may most effectively be viewed. And although innumerable poems have celebrated the remote cres-

A widespread
notion

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The tradition
is baseless

cent of the moon, we are aware of none that takes for theme our own St. George's Crescent, where the enchanting diffidence of the young moon's curves is mingled unprecedentedly with the same human uproar that resounds throughout the old mediaeval legend. No. Artist and aesthete avoid the town with a conspicuous shudder; whilst your common mortal moves amid the unspeakable pageant of its streets with an incredible air of completest apathy.

Now, it would be an interesting and extremely simple business to explain the source and the strength of this tradition—to show how far it is the outcome of our national mode of thought, how it was vitalised by Wordsworth, and bound with so much irrelevant mortality by Ruskin. But in this matter, as in so many others, there is something infinitely more important than mere retrospect. It is infinitely more important, for example, to understand that the tradition is baseless; and it is infinitely more important to understand that if it were as well-founded and deeply-rooted as it appears to be, then the existence of the modern city would be a mere affair of moments, and it would proceed to capture a sufficient beauty by the simple but expensive process of growing ruinous and moss-grown and dismantled. For it is written among the least

GLAMOUR OF THE TOWN

Masterpieces
of sheer physical
beauty

dubitable of the laws of life that where there is no beauty there can be no love. And where there is no love there is no loyalty. And disloyalty is death. If we could implacably believe, for a single instant, that this affair of streets and spires and lacerated walls was essentially and entirely hideous, then that unimaginable moment would suffice to destroy the world-wide energies of which those spiry streets are the ganglion and vital nucleus. For in the sentence which the modern world is laboriously inscribing the modern city plays the part of verb; and to believe it dissonant and unmusical is to fall victim to a black-hearted and wholly intolerable pessimism.

But, of course, as a matter of fact, no such belief exists. Under cover of that outward apathy there thrives, often unrealised, always unconfessed, a very real delight in the masterpieces of sheer physical beauty which our cities are constantly building up. Our attitude, often enough, is that of the nameless poet who saw that the London streets were more beautiful than refined gold, and who veiled his passion with a mercenary metaphor. We talk of the glamour of the town, of the town's utility, of its streets being 'paved with gold,' but it is the beauty of the town that these phrases in reality

A NUMBER OF THINGS

His daily
descent upon
the town

represent. And all that is required to make this delight self-conscious and explicit is a little self-analysis on the part of the individual. Secure that, and our dream of easels in Whitechapel, of poets brooding over the stern magnificence of Bootle, the whimsical uplands of Wavertree, will become a vivid and exhilarating fact.

And upon the individual the effect of such realisation would be not a little valuable. We can figure such an one, making upon the morrow of his discovery his daily descent upon the town. He would pass from his suburban train (not forgetting, we may be sure, the epical value of that) through the pleasant twilight of the Exchange Station archways, and so into Tithebarn Street. And Tithebarn Street, floored with the frail shimmer of recent rain, roofed with an unemphatic sky, and set about with its fantastic groups of buildings, he would find an extremely satisfactory sort of place. To the left his eye would catch the blaze of colour that stands for the Moorfields hoarding, its minor incongruities, touched by distance and blended into a few fierce master-tones of orange and vermilion; to the right he would note the exquisite diminution of the line of cabs drooping in ebon splendour down the hill. And above and beyond he would catch a glimpse of the

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suffused brightness that betrays the presence of the river.

Tasting these pleasures like a connoisseur

And so, tasting these pleasures like a connoisseur, lolling them delicately upon his tongue he would spring into Exchange Street East, and alter his outlook in a single stride. Too brief for perceptible convergence, the walls that would flank his vision crush their varied incidents into a rich fantasy of machicolation and abutment, and over this the early light would drip and foam, sparkling on the pediments, leaping across the pools of damask shade. His glance would adventure into the deep spaces of the Exchange, cross-hatched with sunlight. And fronting him, drawn massively across the morning, he would mark the purple barrier of buildings which rises above the swift bright tremor of the Dale Street traffic, and whose emphatic verge breaks, amidst a few slim spears, into a coruscation of sculptured stone, stamping a changeless emblem upon a changeful sky.

II

Liverpool has her artists. Some are known and great; others are unknown and greater. In the atelier, the South Castle Street atelier, of one of the latter—a young man whose name has already begun to have a meaning for the

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'The Liver-
pool and Leeds
Canal'

elect—there hangs a little ebony-framed pastel which, if it were widely known, and its motive and meaning rightly understood, would make this article entirely superfluous. It records a scene of extraordinary loveliness: and it is named, 'The Liverpool and Leeds Canal.' A stretch of sombre water, lost in a tangle of warehouse ends and aimless walls; a low bridge bearing a few scattered lights; an uncertain group of barges underneath. That is all. But it sufficed our artist. The astounding clarity of his vision, the absolute impartiality of his appetite for beauty, enabled him to apprehend and appreciate with utmost exactitude the decorative significance of a subject that had theretofore been contemptuously disregarded; and by the dexterity of his meticulous hand, the brilliance of his technique, he was able to transcribe the scene with unswerving veracity. By consequence, his picture teaches, far more eloquently and impressively than any mere pen can hope to do, the lesson of our city's beauty, of the charms so lavishly displayed, and so consistently, so incredibly ignored. But unfortunately that little luminous masterpiece is hidden for the nonce under a highly-efficient bushel. Still more unfortunately, none of its maker's more famous confrères appear to have the

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capacity or the courage to put forward similar announcements. And it is left accordingly to us who have our city's cause at heart to bungle as best we may with colourless and unconvincing words.

The beauty of
Liverpool

But there is one feature of that picture which calls for particular reference. Its bridge and shadowed waters, it should be noted, are not beautiful because they are like a bridge and shadowed waters in the country; they are beautiful because they are like a bridge and shadowed waters in the town. The lights which scatter a kind of resonant radiance above the arch are not beautiful because they are like stars, or like a sunset; they are beautiful because they are like street-lamps, because they possess all the pictorial effectiveness that belongs to street-lamps. And if the beauty of Liverpool is to be thoroughly appreciated, if such a haphazard journey as that between Exchange Station and the Town Hall is to become the exhilarating experience which we have shown it might so easily be made, then this fact of the independence and entire individuality of that beauty must be thoroughly realised.

There are some disciples of Richard Jefferies and so forth who insist that any picturesque qualities the city may possess are lucky accid-

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Nature, they
say, asserts
herself

ents due to the adventurous inroads of what they call Nature. Nature, they say, asserts herself even in the streets, and tries to save your artificial affair of bricks and mortar from a blank hideousness. What these people mean by Nature is, presumably, external nature, the nature of daisies and buttercups, fields and hedgerows; for the modern city is, of course, as much a piece of nature as a field of corn, and chimney-pots and mushrooms, New Brighton Tower and the aurora borealis are all equally genuine outcrops of the great elemental universal forces.

They mean, then, these people, that it is to the influence of external nature that any picturesqueness in Liverpool is due; and we mean that it is due to nothing at all of the sort. That picturesqueness, never accidental, always inevitable and profound, is due to no fortuitous resemblance to the pictures outside the walls. The great flanks of the warehouses in Back Goree are not beautiful because if you stare at them persistently enough, and flog your imagination fiercely enough, they begin to reveal a likeness to miniature precipices. They are beautiful because they are full of quaint passages of colour, because they catch the light in curiously effective ways, because their outline strikes against the welter of buildings beyond

GLAMOUR OF THE TOWN

with a lusty precision. The Princes Road Boulevards are not beautiful because they carry reminiscences of woodland paths, but because by some unprecedented magic their union of leafage and grey pavement and ringing hoofs evokes an atmosphere whimsical, unique, eminently modern. And, indeed, so far are we from thinking that the beauty of the town is due to the efforts of ambassadors from the alien encampment without, that we would assert on the contrary that these ambassadors gain much of their dignity from the magnanimous efforts of the town.

The magnanimous efforts of the town

We have noticed, for instance, during these recent days of unflawed midsummer skies, that in Dale Street and Castle Street, and thereabouts, the stony forest of chimney-stems, spires, gables, peaked roofs, and so forth, reaching upwards like so many lean, aspiring fingers, have clutched these skies and woven them with amazing cunning into novel and delectable flourishes—ribands of pure colour, fringed ensigns of colour, streams and fountains of colour, infinitely more pleasing and significant than the featureless waste of blue, which in the open country carries with it on even the brightest day the sense of hopelessness that haunts all over-serious, over-consistent effort. And the

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Her moment
of supremest
loveliness

colour of those alert streamers seemed to become more vital and intense. It seemed as though some process of compression were giving one the quintessential juices of the sky. And it proved a tonic of the finest sort.

And we have noticed again, all through the spring and summer, how lonely trees have won a new potency from their environment. There is one that stands at a certain spot in Scotland Road, an anaemic trembler that would be incontinently crushed out of life by its brethren of the open countryside. But Liverpool has adopted and ennobled it. Behind it burns a torrent of red-brown wall, and about its ineffective base is scattered a multi-coloured riot of battered paper. Against the bronze of the background the wan leaves pick out with an effect more than Japanese in delicacy, and those rags and tags of paper, with their carnival suggestions, complete the impression of something Eastern and exotic.

Such instances could be multiplied indefinitely, but there is one aspect of our city which places the principle beyond dispute. For it is when she thrusts external nature completely out of sight that Liverpool attains her moment of supremest loveliness. With the sun dead, and the moon and stars invisible, the sky, a

GLAMOUR OF THE TOWN

half-remembered legend, she assumes by one swift, grave gesture an utterly indescribable magnificence. She is lighted from end to end by her own terrene flames. In the long straight avenues, such as Stanley Road, you get the most exquisite arrangements of delicately-dwindling stars; the little heights—Brownlow Hill and London Road, for instance—fling high into the air long garlands and castanets of fire; palpitating cascades mark the busier ways and confluences; and down by the Stage, past the great platform where the tramcars intricately wheel, you can watch the lights spraying into all manner of patterns against the curtains of the night, here burning in tranquil companies, there etching in solitary points a whimsical design of pallid gold.

Arrangements
of delicately-
dwindling
stars

We began with one picture, let us finish with another. It hangs, this one, where all may see it. Every constant visitor to our Art Gallery is sooner or later confronted by it. And yet it is appraised by no critics, in no catalogues recorded. It is framed by the pillars that flank the gallery entrance. On the right the great bulk of St. George's Hall looms above a sea of pavement flecked with lamplight, blurred and marbled with pedestrians. The round moon-green arc lights hang like curious fruits. The

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Entirely
disregarded

windows of the hotel cut heavy orange slots. A vast sign sends intermittent waves of scarlet surging into the heart of the fog of light that rises from below. Nearer, the Wellington Column beams up, vaguely ominous, into the purple deeps that slash it to half its daylight length. And beyond, and beyond again, the lights trail and leap and linger, and the figures multiply and disperse, and the distance melts into a warm tumultuous calm.

Yes, it is a fine picture, more vital, more vivid, more passionate than any within. And it hangs there for the most part entirely disregarded.

XIV WINTER,
 THAT ROUGH
 NURSE

WINTER, ROUGH NURSE

BUILT out of the golden *débris* of his August holidays, your townsman's conception of the country is a queer, collapsible structure, run up hastily at the approach of May, fully furnished and equipped by mid-July, but coming down again, in rust and ruin, among the equinoctial rains. It begins with the buds; it ends with the last melancholy leaf; for the rest—greyness and rheum. A fall of snow, indeed, because it masks the true features of the earth, tricking it out like a monster pierrot, may renew his interest for a moment. But when February's dykes are filled with rain, he toasts his toes complacently in Tooting and thinks with a shudder of the land lying lean and wretched—a naked corpse if not an actual skeleton. Beneath his study window the little square of garden which makes a kind of mirror for the seasons, and into which they do try to peer as they pass, shows nothing but apathy and gloom. And he takes that woe-begone picture for a true portrait of the outside world.

Dismal hallucination! The year never hibernates, March is never a dead March, and I sometimes think that the land seems never more living and alert than when it lies most leafless. There is a sense, and a very simple and true one, in which the end of autumn is like the open-

The country
is a queer,
collapsible
structure

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The earth is
stripped

ing of a great bronze door, and the scattering of the last leaves the withdrawal of a baffling curtain. For now, as at no other time, the strong drama of the actual earth, the supple play of the muscles of the soil, is revealed to the human spectator. He sees the organic relation of hill to valley, the way the watersheds are welded together, and can watch the cunning dovetailing of uplifts and divides, the collaborations between woodlands and streams. The earth is certainly stripped—but as an athlete is stripped for a race, a strong man for a struggle. It is not in the least like the denudation of poverty. Fold after fold, the clogging coverlets of damask and maroon have been heaved aside; and now the living creature, all rippling muscle and mighty limb, bends purposefully before you at its task.

It is a great sight, I always think—restorative as well as stirring. The eye re-discovers, for example, the true meaning and movement of the roads. In the green smother of July they lay half-buried, shining but capriciously, incomprehensibly, disconnected hieroglyphs. But now the scattered curves link up, quick and consequent, from horizon to horizon; and to stand on the tiniest eminence is to see them forging through the land waves as logically and intently as an army on the march. They tack delicately

WINTER, ROUGH NURSE

to and fro among the billows; and you see, as plainly as the men who planned them saw, the problems they have to face, the distant mark they fight for, the exhaustless series of canny or audacious strokes by which they win their end. Similarly with the elder ducts: the water-courses, brooks, and rivers. If the high-roads, linking Temple Bar with Torquay, are the tingling nerves of the great body, the streams may stand for its veins. And winter, like a subtle demonstrator, displays them by a double process, exposing them with one stroke, neatly paring away the tissues that obscured them, and then, by a second, dilating them, swelling them with rains. Treated thus, the gleaming mesh springs into sight as surprisingly as though the landscape had been suddenly slipped beneath a powerful lens. The refreshing fibres gleam in unsuspected places. The mysterious richness of a certain meadow, that used to shine out erratically on the general shield, a cryptic blazon, is at length logically explained.

The stark
machinery
of the land

It is this general rationalisation of the view, no doubt, that makes the wintry landscape seem so friendly. Certainly, at any rate, there is nothing in the least steely or repellent in this display of the stark machinery of the land, its undressed ligaments and thews. The earth is

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Treated like
Royal children

seen to be a reasonable earth, neither blind, nor brutish, nor incomprehensible. In the very kindness of summer there is something a little casual and contemptuous. We wander for ever among ambuscades and curtains. We are treated like Royal children—kept in a noble nursery, fobbed off with pretty colours and rich toys, but never admitted to the council chamber. But now, in winter, Nature treats you like an equal. You are taken into her confidence; find with a reassuring thrill that you can follow her plans; discover, in a word, the kinship between your body and the original clay. The unmistakable stamina of the structure, too, is a kind of solace. Far more than the sleepy snugness of July, this unpartitioned prospect speaks of power and purpose. With all the unessential barriers deleted, and even the artificial subdivisions of the hedgerows half-erased, there is a general merging and co-ordination. 'Views' melt into one massive surface, the deep rhythm of the land shakes itself clear of localities, its noble continuity is declared. We see the country as a pouring tide of plateaus, declivities, plains, flecked with towns and cities—a tide that sweeps on uninterruptedly until it breaks at length upon the borders of the actual sea. England lives.

These are the larger, more panoramic, issues.

WINTER, ROUGH NURSE

But they invade and vivify all the details. The little sounds of the season, as well as its wide views, display the same sweet reasonableness. Our poets, pacing their hearthrugs, bewail the lack of bird-song. But those who really know the winter are aware that the very fewness of the voices gives those that remain not only a heightened value, but also an augmented meaning. They gain intention as well as intensity; so that the voice of a single thrush, ringing out through a February evening, will seem not only to fill a whole valley almost intolerably full of sweetness, but to shine out, on the grey background of the surrounding stillness, with an almost legible significance. Instead of the dear, indistinguishable babel of the summer-time we are granted the unentangled lyric of one visible, traceable bird. The music is no longer a ravelled rain of notes from secret sources. There, undisguised, clear, on the clean, bare boughs is the soft courageous throat, visibly throbbing. And the branches themselves display a lovely logic which their midsummer splendour wholly hides. Delicately discriminated on a dove-grey sky, every detail in a double sense *distinguished*, they are found to follow a perfect pattern, reticent as an Eastern print, yet as intricate as Western lace. They spire upwards like foun-

The voice of a
single thrush

A NUMBER OF THINGS

A single oak
tree

tains, shredding into finer spray as they ascend, but maintaining one consonant curve from base to outermost twig. Like fountains, too, they seem (as at no other time) to be spontaneous expressions of earth's energy jetting up through the crust of soil. On the costly landscapes which the townsman knows, the trees are strewn like surface decorations, great green and golden flowers, detachable as flowers worn by a woman. But now, reduced to their elements, they are seen to sustain and complete the long lilt of the land. Thus, dark among the dark tillage, a single oak tree will bring the whole scene to a point, as with a conclusive gesture. And in the mass, clamping the hill-tops or mustered in the plains, the banded timber, as resolute as jutting rock, seems as much a part of the fundamental framework as rock itself. Yet it is not the earth's nakedness alone that leads to this effect of eagerness and intimacy. That would be a very incomplete notation of the season's charms which failed to take account of the special aerial drama of the time—the constant stir and release of soft colour, ceaselessly flowing and fading, filling the February skies with a delicate fever. Here, once more, our urban misconceptions are remarkable, for we always speak of the shortening of the days as though it were a dis-

WINTER, ROUGH NURSE

maldecapitation. Whereas, in reality, of course, their brevity is the result of an almost passionate concentration, a quickening of the revolution of the hours, every episode in the play being speeded-up in order to make it fit the shrunken stage. From the first faint silvery overture of the dawn to the deep *finale* of the sunset, the *tempo* of the day is heightened; and each phase stumbles on the heels of its precursor with an effect of blushing confusion. It is noon before the sun has cast aside the special colours of the early morning, and already, so hotfoot is the pace, he must begin to assume the livery of evening. No hibernation here! To begin the day's walk beneath the first twilight and maintain it until the stars begin to bud again is to feel that one has rather finely fulfilled the true round and tenor of the day. One need be no distressing athlete to achieve it now. The petals of the dawn have barely withered before the clouds are clustering together again to construct the last crimson rose.

Almost
passionate
concentration

Familiar enough, to such a happy walker, the effect of all this celestial excitement on the empty fields below. In the shelter of the copses and on the grey grass of the pastures, the pure, pale colours, light as plum-bloom, melt and shift like the colours in an opal. The interfusion

A NUMBER OF THINGS

An interfusion
of the seasons

of early and late light suggests an interfusion of the seasons—the softly streaming sunlight of the autumn thrilled with the fresh passion of the spring. Very beautiful are the days (we have had many of them lately)—the days of violet and misty gold, when September, secretly returning, meets May in the midst of the woodlands, the broken bands of sunlight streaming about her as she runs. Very beautiful, too, and equally a monopoly of winter's, the days when the earth, mist-suffused, appears as frail as porcelain, no more substantial than the silken air, and one seems to move in the midst of exquisite crisis. Just a word, or a touch, you feel, would complete the spell or spoil it—dissolve the thin veil completely or set it tossing together in self-protective folds. And there are other days, not dissimilar, known even in the suburbs, when the horizons draw softly together, and the contrast between the elusive mist and the sharp outlines of the trees and houses creates a queer impression of unreality and invests the simplest object with a strange significance. It is, perhaps, an old lane, or some reeds beside a pool, or a twisted scrap of thorn—but it stands out with a sudden poignancy, heavy with a wordless beauty. We may have passed it a thousand times before; but we see it now as

WINTER, ROUGH NURSE

though it had been but that instant created.

The true tide
of the country
life

And as with the country, so too with the country-folk—the same new candour and cordiality. Wandering through the winter with a knapsack, I came last week to a certain little mid-England market-town (why conceal its name?—it was Stratford-on-Avon) known to me hitherto, as to most others, in its professional midsummer character of ‘literary Mecca’ and so forth. And now, for the first time, I find it living its own life, playing an organic part in the life of the county and the country, serving the surrounding villages, the villages of the Vale of the Red Horse, exactly as it did in Shakespeare’s time, and revealing its own character, concealed amid the self-conscious flurry of the tourist months, in all manner of intimate, artless ways. . . . And this deep change in Stratford’s attitude is typical of the change that passes all over England. All the summer through, nowadays, the best of our countryside, from Kent to Cumberland, from Devon to Durham, is converted into a kind of brightly coloured channel through which the stream of holiday-makers continuously pours. But at the end of autumn, as at the shutting of a dam, the artificial flow is checked and the true tide of the country life resumes its immemorial course. There is no fantasy in this; the human

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Hard weather
makes soft
hearts

change is really extraordinarily profound. Instead of landladies and apartments you find farmers' wives and homesteads; instead of being regarded as a tourist you are welcomed as a friend. As at the end of a ball, there is a general unmasking; and even the spectator finds himself discarding some well-worn sentiments. The footlights are lowered, you catch the players in mufti, and you discover that the people you had looked on as at players in an idyll are familiar men and women. The countryman is found to be a finer thing—a fellow-countryman. Perhaps, too, hard weather makes soft hearts, and the cold a warmer welcome. Certainly, at any rate, *et ego in Arcadia* is just a sickly-sweet midsummer sigh. Now, wherever you go, you will find something more enduring than an idyll; for every road you follow will lead you, before nightfall, to the door of a human home.

XV A FRAGMENT

A FRAGMENT

THE year's at the spring and day's at the morn, and—writing's a bore. Flush from the verge of the bed of dragon's-blood wallflowers that burn beneath the window where I write (the velvet vagueness of their petals bedimmed now by a double bloom—deliciously dusked by the dew), a silvery lawn, still in shadow, slides and slants to a river's brim, to a pool this minute pierced by the sun; and up on the other side, singing exultantly, as though rising refreshed from the cool, coppice climbs above coppice, up to the heath above, confronting dawn's arrows as they rise—receiving and weaving them, shattering and scattering them, tossing them down the slope through the stems and the moss in tumbling torrents of butter-bright primroses. And I want to be splashing in that river, I want to be mounting that hillside: I'm sick of pens and paper and tame type. Give me leave, and I'd bring you back, I'm convinced, a much jollier tale of adventures than any I can squeeze out of books. A book is but a mirror, and criticism mirrors that again; your position is worse than the Lady of Shalott's. Why not have the real thing—the bright world, direct sunlight—the live tug and entreaty of the fact.

Why not have
the real thing?

But of course we can't—mustn't. This has

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The best book got to be a literary causerie, and it must be written now, this minute, or it will never catch the post; and so I must just miss the best bathing hour—not of the day alone, but positively of the whole year—and sit watching the sunlight slowly leaving my pool and creeping up the lawn, eating the shadows as it crawls, till the wallflowers doff their outer veil of dew. But I'm not going to be done altogether. I've a plan for getting back at old Literature. If I must write about books it shall be about books that betray her, books that foster an impatience with reading and make you long to fling letters aside. Gross treason—but I'm mutinous; blame the sap and the sun. And there's another vindication—as you shall see.

For I'm far from sure that the greatest merit of literature at any time (and the ultimate test of its worth) isn't just its power to provide its own antidote—to foster a disaffection for itself. The best book is the one that makes you feel that reality is better; it's the second-rate stuff that turns us into students. It is poor fiction, for instance, that makes incessant novel readers: with its pages coloured so feverishly and its values all faked it fills us up with such false ideas of picturesqueness that the everyday world, when we raise our eyes from the book, seems

A FRAGMENT

unbearably lifeless and drab; we snatch up another cheap novel to hide it. But the great books, of any sort, prose, poetry, fiction, so freshen the reader's sight, teach him to see so intelligently, that reality when he looks up flashes out irresistibly; good novels make more novels almost needless. They make life itself your romance. They are just a preface to the spreading serial of the days. That is a thing to remember, at all times of the year; that the test of good literature is its power to make you turn your back on it. That it is only bad books that breed book-worms.

How to walk

.

Not many people have learned how to walk; and very very few of those have been writers. Indeed (and here I get a chance for another dig at Letters) it is an art whose acquisition has been hindered most of all by the books of appreciation written round it. Walking has been written to death. Most of us have been lamed by sharp pens. By Stevenson's pen, by Hazlitt's, by Borrow's. They have made it a department of literary culture. First 'Virginibus Puerisque'—then probably 'Lavengro'—then a nice new knapsack. The latter being purchased—not to enable us to escape from books, but to help us to clamber inside them. When you buckled

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Excessively
superior,
immensely
picturesque

on your first rucksack you were really, at heart, trying to bind yourselves into your copy of 'Virginibus'—and an alert ear would have caught the creak of buckram as you strode and perceived that you stepped in time to a certain literary tempo. *'Give me the clear blue sky over my head and the green turf beneath my feet, a winding road before me, and a three hours' march to dinner'*—you remember? Again, yet more insidious: *'If the evening be fine and warm, there is nothing better in life than to lounge before the inn door in the sunset, or lean over the parapet of the bridge, to watch the weeds and the quick fishes.'* Honestly, now—did you never strike precisely that attitude, out of admiration for R. L. S., and feel, as you did so, excessively superior, immensely picturesque, and virtuous? Of course you did. So did everybody. So did I.

All the same, it wasn't the real thing—and though the real thing may result from it, though the ring of your boot-heels on the genuine road may drown the pretty prose rhythm that set them marching, it is a way of commencing that incurs many dangers—dangers, some of them, that endure. One is the way it leaves you trying, instinctively, to make everything you meet match the essay, and rejecting the details that won't. You look out hungrily for a bridge with

A FRAGMENT

a parapet, and probably pick your inn because it is near one; instead of remembering that the really romantic thing would be to find a bridge without a parapet, or an inn of an utterly new kind. And you do this especially (and especially is it dangerous) in the case of the details called people. Nature, after all, often is picturesque in the good old traditional way—and to see beauty only in the objects hallowed by Hazlitt would still keep you fairly well stocked with real pleasures: 'blue skies, winding roads, and green turf' being always pretty freely supplied. But human nature is less docile. And to go picking and choosing for Petulengros and Pickwicks would leave you happy only in the hands of humbugs and hypocrites. The Open Road is a very fine thing, but an open mind is better; and the cult of the first, as often practised at present, produces a terrible lack of the second. For you have got to remember that the romantic thing is the real thing, and that if it looks dull it is only the fault of your eyesight. And you have got to remember, too, that the reallest things of all are exactly those that have never yet been written about. The village that offered you a spick-and-span picture-palace instead of the parapeted bridge of your dreams ought to have delighted you, not reduced you to disgust. It ought to have

An open mind
is better

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Something
R. L. S.
never saw

reminded you of the fact that you were seeing something R. L. S. never saw, that you had outstripped old Hazlitt at last; and the realisation ought to have made you understand that were Hazlitt you he'd have seen the picturesqueness of the picture-house. He'd have seen all it stood for, and realised the romance of it: he'd have made a note on the spot for an essay on the new power that drags at a given moment half the cottagers of England into a vast system of darkened halls and there feeds their minds with fresh-cut slices of the outer world—pieces of Africa, slabs of the East, certified chunks of the Poles. The mere words 'Pathé Frères' would have set his pen spinning happily: he would have spoken of Paris playing the part of monstrous reflector and throwing beams from the antipodes into the blinking eyes of Berkshire clowns. . . . And years afterwards when kinemas had given place to something still queerer, young aspirants, reading his eulogy, would buckle on their rucksacks and go solemnly, sentimentally, rapturously in search of villages with picturedomes—and no parapets.

XVI A JUMP
THROUGH JUNE

A JUMP THROUGH JUNE

IT was one of those dank afternoons which dismally denied that May had come, and our hostess was a person with a noble passion for fresh air. We clung convulsively to her fireside accordingly, and made remarks about the Comet. There was a poet among us, and he was very much to the point; so much to the point, indeed, so apt and opulent in imprecation, that the right to reproduce his phrases had better be strictly reserved. It was highly agreeable to listen to him; but it was left to our hostess herself to make the really momentous suggestion:

The really
momentous
suggestion

‘Well, after all,’ she said, ‘why need we sit shivering here?’

Three full-grown males on the instant made an intense dash towards the windows. But they had misapprehended her.

‘Why need we sit shivering here? It’s true that just here, in Liverpool, it is March in everything but name. But it’s also true that farther south in all but name it’s July. Summer hasn’t swum the Mersey yet, but it long ago crossed the Channel. It’s fairly in the land you know—flowing up the fields of England like a great green-and-golden tide. Well! Why shouldn’t we run down the beach to meet it? Why don’t we scramble out of these miserable immovable ba-

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Plump into the
future

thing-vans—these cold and clammy northern suburbs—and get a kind of anticipatory dip? Time and tide wait for no man; but there's no earthly reason why men should wait for tides....'

So she ran on irresistibly. 'Let us dive plump into the future'—that was how she summed the notion up. And so, the very next morning that ever was, a picked crew of us stood on the summit of Oxtan Hill looking down at the milk-white roadway that goes whipping to and fro, like the flicked white thong of a whip, among the mist-grey meadows below. Beside us—sobbing excitedly—crouched like a cat for the spring, loomed the great black engine that was going to juggle with time and sling us slam into July. The clock of St. Saviour's cried seven. We climbed aboard; a lever clucked; the sobs simmered up to a croon, the croon to a roar; and the great machine stormed growling along the ridge of the hill like a huge beast nosing for a trail. It found it—found, that is to say, the little sally-port of Holme Lane—took the descent in one sickly-sweet swoop; and there, in a second, we were skimming round the curves of the white double S, scudding past the little inn that dots it, leaping straight for the transverse wall of trees. And then, with a gulp, we had veered to the left, and the wood was a wind-blown scarf,

A JUMP THROUGH JUNE

The time
machine

and the Wirral was pouring past us in a torrent of undulant fields. Away to the right, about the whale-backed Burton Woods, the silver-grey sands of the Dee shimmered up like a delicate dawn. They broke into full vision, a shining shield. And away beyond them, crest over crest, surging like combers, the purple hills of Wales came on in a galloping tide. The black beast beneath us gave tongue triumphantly, and its voice went clanging through the country ahead like a courier beating out an empty road. That road ran south. We were driving straight for summer at forty odd miles an hour.

Now though the time machine (as by this you have guessed) was thus nothing more than a motor-car, all romance needn't therefore ooze out of this record and leave it flabby and stale. For our run (as you will see) did really demonstrate that you can play off space against time—that a well-directed car can make the loveliest mess of mere mechanical manacs and such things. And it did more. For though it seems a hackneyed thing enough, to mount a motor-car is still to plunge into sensations so bizarre and strange that no one yet has had the pluck to attempt their tabulation. For our writers, when they would speak of them, still use the antique terms—through love or lethargy they

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Measuring
rods like a
ten-mile belt
of forest

plunge their pens into the ink-wells first devised to fit the needs of wayfarers like Hazlitt—they write of motoring, I mean, as though it were but a sort of speeded-up walking tour, a kind of precipitate pedestrianism. They babble sweetly of woodbine and bird-song, running brooks, and the life of the fields. A canting convention! The boom of the pace-born wind, for one thing, bars out all bird-song as though by brazen doors. And that exchange is typical. It is no longer by the meek, familiar code of foot-travellers that the motorist measures his progress and adjusts his days. It is by measuring rods like a ten-mile belt of forest, by landmarks like a solid mountain mass, by those large essential rhythms of soil and race which seem to the pedestrian as unchanging and far-reaching as the skies.

And by the skies themselves, too! For, coincident with these, there inevitably troop into the outlook of the motorist (of the motorist, at any rate, who is weak or wise enough to reject the earthier joys of driving) sign-posts and beacons more majestic still, cairns and monuments even more tremendous than those titanic mile-stones made of woods and hills. I refer, of course, to the features of the skyscape, to the snowy cliffs and canyons, the rivers and ravines up there. For it is a fact that motoring makes

A JUMP THROUGH JUNE

you more familiar with these celestial signs than any other form of earthly progress yet contrived.

You thread the
thunders

On trainboard you are roofed in jealously. The sky is both squashed and bisected. Your eye is held down to earth and a dizzy swirl of detail. But as you lounge at your ease in a car you are granted the freedom of the heavens. Lean back and look up, and you instantly seem to soar. You leap from height to height. You thread the thunders. You surge sublimely through those seas of blue. Those white and purple clouds become your pacemakers. You notch your progress on those ivory towers.

And since that day was above everything a day of clouds, it was far less of the Wirral that we thought than of those radiant giants, trailing league-long robes, who paced about the blue floors overhead.

And so, when the walls of Chester suddenly shot up on either hand, hemming us in, they brought that sense of almost stifling stillness and strangeness which comes when the quay walls of a foreign port suddenly shut off the space and freshness of the outer sea. Shrugging its peaked shoulders, raising its queer eyebrows, the old quaint architecture about us seemed to crowd and point and peer. We tacked and twisted, sliding at quarter-speed; and the long-

A NUMBER OF THINGS

A sudden rout
of fruity
odours

drawn drone of the wind died suddenly down to the multitudinous murmur and plash of little voices.

And when at last we shook clear of it and broke out through the southern wall into the fresh sea of fields beyond, it was really as though the place had actually been a kind of port, an outpost. Its wall might have been the magic wall that severs north from south, winter from spring. For the sun, hitherto hustled and chivied rudely enough, by those rollicking giants of cloud, had now managed, with the wind's aid, to shake itself fairly free; and at its touch, as by a trick of magic, the wide earth shone and was changed. It seemed to ripen visibly like a monster plum. And this sense of succulence was heightened by a sudden rout of fruity odours which came rushing up out of the soil. The sun's escape from bondage had freed other prisoners too; and up from the secret recesses of the soil they came pouring out pell-mell. There were shaggy wild scents from deep woods, cool, silken sallies from orchards, the strong, ringing savour of pines, dim odours of reeds, the raw smell of newly-turned tilth. To breathe that air became as genuine a joy as munching juicy apples.

For we got all these perfumes, remember,

A JUMP THROUGH JUNE

not at all as the pedestrian does, in a solemn succession of slabs, but in pulsing cascades and crescendos—in positive arpeggios of perfume.

The
speedometer
a kind of
magic clock

It may sound foolish or fantastic, but a swift car, on such a morning, becomes a kind of bow, bounding and zipping across these strings of various scent. And the tune it draws from them teaches the body a new sort of sensual dance. For each unexampled pleasure (and here's more romance for you) does miraculously raise some old null nerve from the dead—does aid at the birth of some blind sense, some embryo dim corner of the brain.

Well, so we sped—a brace of miles every three minutes. The speedometer at my feet (its pointer creeping coyly past thirty, hovering demurely at forty, absent-mindedly straying past the fifties) was a kind of magic clock ticking off, before their time, the hours of the unborn year. Climbing the hill beyond Gresford, the shining Cheshire plain slid back from us in peacock-coloured coils of blue and green; and we seemed to be visibly sloughing the last relics of the old year. And when we swooped down on that little Corot-come-alive at Ellesmere you would have sworn we had at last attained the secret hiding place of June—so much bluer than May's were the waters there, so richly woven the tall

A NUMBER OF THINGS

An eighteenth-century picture

tapestries of green.

But our machinist was not the person to be taken in by tapestries. He wore the frown of a man well pleased; his eyes searched the road ahead; the dial at his feet cast off all disguise and clung brazenly to sixty. The land began to break up and billow as the sea does when it feels the deep waters swell. We slid through the woodcutters' country — climbed a long ridge — sighted the Wrekin — dropped, drumming, down into a dale — snarled out of that — got the Wrekin again — and then, with a rush, were in Shropshire.

And Shropshire was kind. First, she assailed us with primroses. Next, she tried volleys of violets. And when our monster drove doggedly on, indifferent to these dainty admonitions, she sent Sabrina herself, most tranquil, least hurried, of rivers, to pace beside us demurely, deprecating our pace by her peace. We slowed down at that, accepted her serene guidance. And she brought us at length to a town of enchantment, where whole solid centuries, to say nothing of hours, seemed to scale off the earth like a rind, leaving it oddly simple and mellow and sweet. We ran into a street like a street in an eighteenth-century picture; passed out of that into another as Elizabethan as stomachers

A JUMP THROUGH JUNE

and ruffs. And there, somewhat dazed, thinking we'd gone far enough, been magic'd enough for one day, we climbed rather dizzily down.

The name of
this wine

Now those who know Shrewsbury, as they call that magic town on the Severn, know that its elderly architecture, in spite of its charm, is no more than a kind of elegant rim to a sort of central cup—a windless deep hollow, a Garden of Proserpine, where the river wanders drowsily and then falls fast asleep. Brimming with golden warmth, bird-notes rising and breaking like bubbles, that cup seemed a chalice yesterday, filled with wine. ‘And if the name of this wine isn’t Summer,’ said the poet, as he sipped it with solemn glee, ‘may I never drink another jorum of your genuine July.’

XVII A WORD FOR THE WAITS



A WORD FOR THE WAITS

FINELY disregarding both their primal *raison d'être* and the present manner of their reception, certain of our local carollers have a habit of generously distributing their efforts—beginning early, rising to their apogee on Christmas Eve, and then gradually fading away, with an effect of reluctant diminution, until the New Year convinces even the most enthusiastic, in even the most forbearing suburb, that at last their little hour is ended, and their brief annual publicity quite over. We do not condemn this show of enthusiasm, for we realise that a carol without snow is as an egg without salt: and if (as happened this year) our Christmas Eve prove snowless, why, then, let the white nights of the 26th *et seq.* re-echo to the old-fashioned singing. How bewilderingly the snow can upset our chronology and blot out the rather cynical Christmastide of sophisticated modernity we all (even the most prosaic of us) realised with something of a thrill as the blinds ran up yesterday morning. Grant the snow, then, an additional prerogative, and let it be the power to justify the nocturnal presence in our post-Christmas suburbs of those patient enthusiasts whose efforts are always to be encouraged if the modern Yule is to retain the full fruity flavour of the Yules of older and

Their little
hour

A NUMBER OF THINGS

‘The Waits
Academy’ more robustious years.

We do not deprecate the enthusiasm then; but we cannot forbear a suggestion that there are other methods, too, in which that enthusiasm might properly express itself. For, to be quite frank, the carol-singer of to-day sustains his highly picturesque rôle with no more than a partial measure of success. There is really no reason in the world why this should be so. There is indeed no reason why the possibilities of the craft should so far outrun its performances. And so one is tempted to applaud the suggestion that some specific mode of training might be advantageously introduced. ‘The School for Waits,’ or ‘The Waits Academy,’ or (less pleasingly) ‘The Guild of Midnight Carollers’—some such body, far less essentially inapposite than Mr. Freer’s Academy for Actors, might accomplish a deal of really admirable work. For one thing, it might serve to create a modern school of carol-writers, a thing greatly to be desired and practically non-existent. For another it would certainly reintroduce to the light of day (or to the dark night) the numberless entirely beautiful old Songs of Nowell, which now merely lie, in a dull insensate sort of way, on a few ‘unturnd’ pages in the anonymous section of our anthologies. And in those two ways alone the move-

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A WORD FOR THE WAITS

ment would destroy the chiefest blemish of the craft.

Deplorably
limited and
hackneyed

The blemish, of course, is the deplorably limited and hackneyed nature of its repertoire—a blemish which is far from being softened by the fact that certain of the most popular pieces in that repertoire are largely made up of ingenious repetitions. There is, for example, that old favourite, whose first stanza is briefly composed of these two lines:—

Christ was born in Bethlehem,
And in a manger laid.

Now, in the actual rendering, as everybody knows, these two lines, A and B, are repeated thus: A, A, A, B, B, B, A, B; and however deeply he may be inclined to reverence the pious naïveté and wholesome innocence of such a quaint device, there is little doubt that when the listener has had each one of the innumerable verses of the carol so treated, and has heard the whole carol repeated in various directions by half-a-dozen different choirs, all within one hour, there is little doubt, we think, that the reverence of the listener will in some measure have departed, and that his opinion of Waits in general, and of this carol in particular, will be regrettably un-Christmaslike. A little variety, a little energetic research and refurbishing, and such unwished-

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Best of all
carols

for consummations might easily be avoided—
as easily avoided as the equally unChristmaslike
hymns which many of the singers seem impelled
by their extremity to serve up. Let them repeat
instead the delightful ‘Cherry Tree Carol,’ or
‘The Holy Well,’ or ‘The Three Kings’ or ‘The
Rose,’ each one as beautiful as its heartsome
name, and each one brimming over with the
right old reverential joyousness. Let them
learn, in especial, and sing so that no listener
may ever again forget it, that best of all carols,
‘I sing of a Mayden,’ with its—

He came all so still,
Ther His moder was,
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the gras.
He came all so still
To His moder’s bower,
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the flower.
He came all so still,
Ther His moder lay,
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the spray.

So doing they will find that condemnable iterations will become as needless, Sankey and Moody as inappropriate, as the string-strains of the wandering Teutons who are already offering us a dreadful substitute.

XVIII THE OCTO- BER RETROSPECT

OCTOBER RETROSPECT

TO those who are fortunate enough, or fanatical enough, to be learned in the lore of the seasons, October, no doubt, presents herself as the owner of quite a number of significant monopolies; swallow-flights, for instance, and free desserts; hips and haws, again, and ash-tree corals, and yellow birch-tree sequins, fragrant plough-parallels, with streets of wiry stubble melting rhythmically before them; a certain new gravity in the sunlight, too, and decorous, reassuring dawns; and always, of course, like the wide-margéd lyrics of some modern decadent, the slender autumnal bird-calls, imperative because so few, etching a fine pattern in the grey tranquillities. These, we understand, are the elements to make up the traditional symbol of October; but it is to a vastly different alphabet that the mere townsman turns when he desires to copy out the month's especial signature.

The month's
especial
signature

To one accustomed to make his dial of the seasons out of much more carnal things than Marvell's 'Flowers and herbs,' October is chiefly momentous as a kind of dress-parade, a miniature resurrection and reunion. His summer, and especially the later weeks of it, has been a long series of cleavages and disruptions, of luggage-laden departures and dislocated bonds, of

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Was it worth
our while?

all manner of uncertainties and incompletenesses. The advent of October ends all this, for it brings the holidays to a formal close. The ranks fill up again, the pulse of the machine begins to throb with a fierce, familiar regularity, there is a general effect of the town getting back into its stride. It is essentially a month of transition, and, like all such buffer periods, it presents an admirable opportunity for retrospect, for quiet reconsideration and appraisal. A thousand and one things thrust themselves forward for revision, but of them all none is more proximate or domineering—few, perhaps, more important—than the great question of Holidays. That wild, disturbing holiday fever from which we are just recovering, how far was it essential, how far helpful or wise? Was all the hysterical scurrying hither and thither entirely needful? Was it, after all, really worth our while?

Signs are not wanting, indeed, to show that the answers to these questions are not so inevitable as the questions themselves. The holiday, it would seem—the old-fashioned state of concentrated recreation—is beginning to fall under suspicion. We are beginning to doubt its digestibility, beginning to wonder whether the sudden dislocatory spell of dogged laziness or extravagant athleticism is really the most efficacious

OCTOBER RETROSPECT

method of saucing the year's work. There is, for example, the highly significant welcome which has been accorded to that peculiarly modern invention, the Week End. The Week Ender is a man who shares Dan Leno's distaste for 'lump butter on Friday and dry bread all the rest of the week.' He prefers his butter spread, his recreation equally distributed; and he is prepared, accordingly, to sacrifice his three weeks, or to make them a frank, not necessarily wholesome, luxury, and to try instead a mild, continuous blend of work and play, of creation and recreation. That is the Week Ender, and at the moment he multiplies apace. He voices very articulately the growing disaffection for the anarchic paroxysms of July-September, and he proposes, too, a measured substitute which modernity seems rather inclined to adopt. For if the essential superiority of the contrivance is as great as the superficial, it will very speedily be put within the range of those to whom it is at present a mere impossible dream.

Week Ender
multiplies
apace

But there is reason for supposing that the essential superiority is not so great as the superficial. There is reason for believing that the Week End lacks one of the most important, probably the most important, of the qualities which every really regenerative holiday must possess. And the curious thing is that the lack is quite

A NUMBER OF THINGS

An extremely
shocking
affair

deliberate, that it prides itself enormously upon the absence of the invaluable quality. The Week-ender has discovered that the July-September transport is, in the quite literal sense of the word, an extremely shocking affair; and the prime aim of his invention is the reduction of that shock by the obvious process of distribution. It is a perfectly obvious process, and a perfectly successful, and therefore an entirely disastrous one. For it is precisely because they are shocking that our holidays are holy. It is precisely that galvanic property which constitutes their most sacred possession. A holiday must always snatch us, with an absolute completeness, out of the ruts of routine, must always souse us in a sort of electric bath of extraordinary experiences. Besides this function, the other functions of the holiday—the medicinal effects of fresh air, the aesthetic stimulus provided by the sight of exquisite landscapes, the intellectual nourishment provided by the assorted information the traveller cannot escape—pale into comparative insignificance. A holiday must, first and foremost, be shocking; that is the great principle with which our examination of the equable Week-End arrangement has provided us. For it is only by forgetting that we can remember; it is only by reject-

OCTOBER RETROSPECT

tion that we accept; it is only by making a series of splendid departures that we are able to retain our little *pied-à-terre*. To live our lives to the fullest extent we must at intervals fling them utterly aside. That, the right holiday, with its air of meaningless delirium, does certainly enable us to do. It makes us inhabitants of a new world, and so grants us permission to look back upon the old with an invaluable air of supreme impartiality.

The right
holiday

XIX THE VOICE OF THE STORM

VOICE OF THE STORM

I WAS alone in the room no longer. Vivid, incessant, unescapable, the voice of the storm, the sense of rigorous and fateful outer happenings, had penetrated even here. It took possession. It dominated the fire—giving it a new zest, a new ardency of colour. It dominated the book-shelves—giving them a strange air of inertia and futility. The window vibrated like a drum; and outside, beyond the quiet, sunlight-lacquered lawn, a group of trees gestured insistently, bowing themselves in fervent salutations, eagerly pointing, against the exultant sky, to some superb, unseen procession. . . . To make blue-black scribble on dirty white paper seemed suddenly a rather pallid, a rather anaemic, sort of ploy. Book reviewing became a sheer irrelevance. And when I pushed open the window to look where the lean trees beckoned, the matter finally settled itself. For it is manifestly impossible to work in a room that looks like a particularly untidy paper-chase.

Outside, the same sense of a splendid, all-dominating power pervaded everything. It was in the hoarse roof-top tumult that throbbed and rose, and pitched into fierce screamings, and fell and rose again. It was in the wind-stung, blood-bright faces of the passers-by: in their eyes, too—alert and clean; and in their tense

Fateful outer
happenings

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The great grey
river

and vital carriage. It was in the writhen branches and the racing débris of the suburbs; and all across the city it spelled itself out, dramatically enough, on placard after placard—in the 'Pier Destroyed' and the 'Township Flooded' and the 'Liners Ashore,' that groaned in black or squealed in yellow, or raged in crimson beneath every newsman's shop. Vivid, incessant, un-escapable, the voice of the storm, the sense of rigorous and fateful outer happenings, had penetrated even here, into the snug bield of the quaint little gullies and canyons which we are in the habit of calling streets.

The river, the great grey river to which we owe so much—the sedate old pedlar that trudges, day in, day out, so dutifully to and fro before our doors—it, too, had heard the hot, rejuvenating Cry. The antique hack no more, it ruffled it now with a fine insouciance, footing astounding galliards among the craft, gay beyond belief with plumes and epaulettes of foam. To sight that foam, indeed, was to drink through the eyes a silver elixir of youth. Woven into elaborate patternings, sword-keen and intense, beneath the clean spring sun, it flashed like the meshes to catch the endless net, a net that strove to catch the spirit of the storm—a net that leaped and strained and broke as its captive

VOICE OF THE STORM

plucked it hither and thither and so escaped
—a net that conjoined as it broke, and turned
its tatters into fresh ingenuities of pattern, and
was tossed abroad, league after league, as lightly
as a scheme of silken lace. And upon this sway-
ing silver mesh the golden reflections of the sun
glittered and burned—great roses of flame that
budded and bloomed and climbed about a
league-wide silver lattice.

To enter a new
world

All this was virile and heartening enough,
but it was no more than the merest prelude to
the laughing chaos of excitement that ran and
leaped and sang triumphant along the farther
shore. The shore, indeed, from Wallasey on-
ward had shrunk to the merest footway—a
riband-narrow breathing-space between the
yellow smoke of the dunes and the white smoke
of the tide. And as one forced one's way be-
tween these tossing elements, pressing against
the passionate body of the wind, one seemed
to pass out of touch with all static and unyield-
ing things, one seemed to enter a new world
where a spirit of splendid mirth made all things
passionately mobile, a world of mad impulses
and exhaustless energies, of tumultuous prodig-
alities and indiscretions. The golden hills upon
the left, spouting their slender flames of whirl-
ing sand, rose and fell against the sky of burn-

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The old fierce
Huntsman

ing blue in a long flourish of eager curves and loops and angles. A solitary covey of white clouds (one almost caught the whirr of their flight) scurrying ardently down-wind brought the far sky itself into league with the general commotion. One was wrapped in hubbub as in a flapping cloak. And on the right the tumultuary waters, a miracle of molten rock—fluctuant, many-veined, precious beyond assay with silver ore—boiled and curved and towered and slashed and sprang in the old, unchanging, unprecedented fashion. And out of the depths of this maelstrom, dripping with purple and bronze, clattered and trooped a wild pageantry of noises. The clangour of great battles came from it, and voices that were almost human; songs that broke down in laughter, and laughter that ended in sobs. And over all the voice of the old fierce Huntsman crashed and soared exultantly; and the mad white hounds leaped up beneath his thonging, baying hoarsely as they sprang, hurling themselves wildly towards the shore.

The tumult had no term. Glutted by the glad frenzy of it all, the eye and the ear seemed to share the universal madness. A sublime dizziness overtook me, a vertigo of the senses, a divine intoxication. Fatigue, hunger, the dull pro-

VOICE OF THE STORM

cesses of the body, were all forgotten; the body itself became no more than a vague negligible glow—a twig that was whirled aside unnoticed as the imagination took its flight. The imagination leaned upon the storm, lusting to attain the secret of all this ecstasy, the end of this mad quest, striving to effect the supreme Identification. For at the core of all this vast triumph there surely lay some message, and in the naked abandon of the body that message might well lie unconcealed. Here was the time, here was the place, to scan the hidden arcana of the world, to touch the heart of the mystery of things; and so the spirit battled with the elements and hung incumbent upon the wind, and achieved that ecstasy of unappeased desire which is the true content. For it is not with satiety that we are satisfied; it is always in the sight of far inaccessible vistas and unattainable ideals that the soul finds its final happiness. And so the voices that called and called were heard without understanding; and the rich inviolate scrolls that wave after wave unfolded were scored with hieroglyphics that could not be interpreted; and yet the spirit suffered no dismay. Careening upon the gale, it fought for impossible visions and found a splendid exultation in defeat. . . .

The heart
of the mystery
of things

And meanwhile, on the other side of the

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Men were
playing golf

dunes, men were coolly playing golf.

Climbing to the lip of the smoking rampart, I found them in the midst of it—if, indeed, so veneer-like an occupation can be said to have a midst. Within a hand's-breadth of that awful perturbation, placid, in an artificial lee, they ambled and rambled, and patted and putted and tapped. . . . And, glancing up stream from my station, I caught a glimpse, too, of the queer dispassionate world of smoke and offices and streets, where, beyond a doubt, great herds of humans were browsing equably on figures, or trooping phlegmatically down dull labyrinths of ledgers—adding, subtracting, trotting here and there. . . . The white hounds plunged ungovernably upon their quest, the fingers of the wind swept the sunshine, plucking great torrents of music from the golden strings; and, pitching her voice to that mad minstrelsy, leaping upon her great earth-bed, in unimaginable throes, the great body of Nature screamed and sang unceasingly in the heroic pride and agony of travail. . . .

And meanwhile, as I say, the golf went satisfactorily forward, and the men in the musty home-made twilight did their tots and cross-tots with commendable rapidity. . . . It all seemed amazingly, impudently incongruous. As incongruous as the little daisy-chains of song that the

VOICE OF THE STORM

giggling larks sought to tie about the neck of the gale. As incongruous as the quiet companies of mild spring flowers that one found offering up their white prayers, singing their purple hymns, among the cathedral coppices at Leasowe. As incongruous as the exceedingly efficient lunch one found it, just then, absurdly judicious to consume.

A lordly clash
and interplay
of colour

From Leasowe the way was an isthmus of greystone—a narrow river of granite that separated two hostile kingdoms—a passage of neutral prose dividing the sullen, sodden epic of the land (school of Southey) from the lyrical blaze and fervour of the sea. As the afternoon drew on and the isthmus rose farther and farther out of the waters, there was added to the commotion of form and sound that had marked the morning, a third commotion—a lordly clash and interplay of colour. A mobile, many-coloured floor—a vast garden of tossing flowers—so the sea now spread beneath the sun.

And presently it grew to evening, and all this illimitable glory of strange blooms, strewn from horizon to horizon beneath the feet of the triumphant procession of the winds, grew still more passionate. The petals were tinged with scarlet, grew tropical and exotic, showed here and there a stain as of new-spilled blood. There

A NUMBER OF THINGS

The emblem of
all beauty

was terror in the sight; it carried with it a hint of sacrifice, of cruelty behind the exultation, of death as the sole avenue to the heart of all the mystery. But the threat rang out unheeded, for there, supreme on the horizon's verge, the ridges of the old Welsh hills running about its base like thorns, flamed the great flower of evening, that Secret Rose, the consummation of the day which is the emblem of all beauty and all wisdom. And towards this, as towards some sublime ideal, the end and the explanation of the day's long miracles, the grey prose tract strove to make its human way. Only to be foiled by the gravel spaces of the Dee, only to accept another splendid disappointment as it paced southwards and watched, beyond the purple impassable, the ineffable petals fall proudly and solemnly apart.

And now it was night, a night of lusty stars and a moon of rare acuteness. The wind had ebbed a little, and a little swerved, but its abatement seemed in no wise to reduce the clangour, for in the dark, so dedicate to silence, all noises have a threefold value. There, in the outer dark, the melee still crashed on superbly, and the white hounds leaped and bayed, and the voice of the Huntsman still rang imperiously forth. It rose up, that elemental music, and filled the deep black spaces between star and star; it made

VOICE OF THE STORM

the stars themselves no more than the spear-points of some vast invisible host; it changed the moon to a shining emblem on some stupendous banner. And as I stood on the naked beach and strove to pierce the blackness, it was as though a great army poured past me through the night, still shouting its splendid unfathomable choruses, still pressing endlessly forward on its high, incommunicable quest.

As though a
great army
poured past
me

XX THE LUSIT-
ANIA—SEPTEM-
BER 9TH, 1907

THE LUSITANIA

TO look down Water Street from the Town Hall any time Saturday forenoon was to contemplate a Liverpool queerly changed and shrunken. For all that vast curtain of clear sky which commonly gives the slope a fine air of loftiness and finality, as though it were the ultimate road in the world, had been strangely torn away, and in its place there loomed tremendously a monstrous series of leaning scarlet towers—four huge columns that overwhelmed the traffic and the buildings, and made even the lattice-work of the Overhead seem a mere unimportant stain. And they repeated themselves, these four gigantic shapes, wherever one chanced to turn. They were reflected in the shops, in the photographs and pictures displayed there; they were on the postcards that were thrust under one's nose at every other step; they were mirrored in the magazines that strewed the pavements. The *Lusitania* and the *Lusitania's* funnels were a kind of public obsession. Not Water Street alone, but really the whole of Liverpool seemed to have been reduced to a mere avenue to that grove of stupendous pillars.

A monstrous series of leaning scarlet towers

And down at the Landing-stage, too, that same discourteous dwarfing was continued. The towers themselves, indeed, became, down

A NUMBER OF THINGS

It was
different

there, the mere accessories, the barely proportionate accessories of the swollen mass that suddenly upheld them—the truculent heap of black and white that overshadowed the meek tide and made the spires and chimneys of Birkenhead behind look uncommonly pale and watery. It was the sort of morning that seems to weaken all visible things, making them look as though they were on the brink of fading listlessly away altogether: the river was slack and lifeless, the sky was a dull grey, the shores were tepid and monotonous. And that surly mass in mid-stream was the solitary thing within sight that refused to share the general enervation. It bluntly defied it all, dominating the day and the dull sky, the river and the grey shore: with its high-piled decks muffled up about its funnels, it had an irresistible air of having turned its coat-collar truculently up; and the rake of those funnels and of its masts, instead of suggesting speed and speed's pliability, simply gave it an additional effect of doggedness, as though its ears were thrust savagely back. It glowered there in midstream, bullying the shipping by its sheer impassivity, its four leaning towers slogging out four crimson wounds upon the sky.

It was different—yes, that was the great fact: it wasn't simply a larger edition of the boats that

THE LUSITANIA

were browsing and dipping in such odd corners of the river as it left unmolested. There was the *Lucania*, for instance—curved, sharpened, flexible—poised and ductile on the water—nervous almost—the sense of speed in every line of her. Well, it was impossible to think that the *Lucania* belonged to the same type of effort as the *Lusitania*. The *Lucania* justified the femininity we ascribe to ships in general; but to think of referring to the *Lusitania* as ‘her’ was clearly ludicrous: the *Lusitania* was obviously ‘It,’ or, with an effort, perhaps, ‘Him.’ Nor did that sensation vanish if you took one of the ferry boats that ventured within a respectful distance of Him and then shrank away again. Black hull and white deck-work, alluring and decorative enough in the *Lucania*’s case, became, when swollen in this fashion, positively grim and threatening: the monster offered no amenities, made no exterior effort to charm. It had the assurance of a piece of nature. It was simply a long black precipice rising stolidly out of the water.

A long black
precipice

When next I saw those leaning towers they were all askew at the end of Chapel Street, and Chapel Street and St. Nicholas’ Church and the whole of Liverpool seemed to be getting twisted away from them. And the sensation of the moving city had evidently roused the city’s inhabit-

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Other
phalanxes
drawn up

ants, for they were pouring down towards the river, black floods of them, in thick eddies and rapids of humanity. 'You'd 'ardly believe it,' they were saying, 'but there's a bloomin' telephone in every room,' and 'It's a palace,' they were saying, 'it's a perfect palace,' and 'Four hundred quid a sweet, if you please,' and 'I back the Loositaynia anyhow.' And down at the stage we formed a huge, patient phalanx, a long black and white mass which looked, from the river, like nothing in the world so much as a black, wintry hedge blown through and through with rags and tags of paper. Rumours came to hand of other phalanxes drawn up, league beyond league, all along the grey dock walls, of other thousands covering the sands at New Brighton.

And within the enclosure itself the impression of Liverpool being there in force was no less persistent. It was a public function. The trains began to arrive from London; the crowd grew denser; began to assume that cosmopolitan complexion which is Liverpool's native hue. There were splendid autocratic males who looked like noblemen, and were probably commercial travellers; there were frowsy plebeians who looked like commercial travellers and were probably noblemen; there was a recognisable

THE LUSITANIA

millionaire or so; there were eager American women, heavily be-tulled, carrying precious boxes labelled 'Maison Louise'; there were their men-folk with clean, tired faces and preposterous hats; there were their self-possessed youngsters with amazing spirits and accents. In a word, the usual vivid excited gathering, but with all its characteristics emphasised; larger than usual, vastly more excited. But the thing that excited them was not, as on other occasions, the fact that the last stage of the journey, or the first stage of the journey, had now almost begun. It was not because Europe was beginning to recede and America wonderfully to approach. The thing that thrilled them, that filled their imagination, was the fact that they were taking part in a piece of history; that they were about to embark on the swiftest and most voluptuous voyage ever attempted by mankind. The *Lusitania* blocked out all thoughts of Europe and America as easily as, towering prodigiously above us, she shut out of sight all but the merest glimpse of river and sky.

The most
voluptuous
voyage

Beneath that long-drawn cliff of ebony there, the concentrated glitter went almost hysterically on; the escalade of tiny, enviable figures continued; the luggage jumped, hovered, swung, and disappeared. In the brief corner of

A NUMBER OF THINGS

Crammed and
bursting with
sheer gold

the sky it permitted us to see, a soft flood of cloud came blowing across the sunset, gently cancelling the gold. The grey passed into violet. An occasional bugle flourished somewhere behind the ramparts overhead; the endless stream of figures crossed and vanished ; all along the Parade behind, the silent phalanxes of watchers waited patiently. The violet began to deepen into night. Lights quivered and flared. The precipice became a black horizon studded rhythmically with course above course of stars. The battlements above it were sumptuous golden terraces, heaped up into gloom. The night deepened, the escalade continued, the transformation of the sullen shape went on. It lost all its sullenness, it became wholly resplendent and alluring, it seemed a mountain-side crammed and bursting with sheer gold. And up across the bridges and beneath the lights the little figures still kept hurrying, passing astonishingly out of sight through the sides of the fabulous glittering hill.

So it continued until nine o'clock. At nine, or a little before, a tremendous aerial tumult announced the beginning of the end. Hitherto, save for those rare bugle-flourishes, the ship itself had remained magnificently dumb, but now it began to forge its own thunders and hurl them

THE LUSITANIA

about the night.— It translated all its mass and truculence into terms of sound, and the ears grew dizzy before the bulk of it. When it ceased, the little noises all about flowed curiously in again, like waters meeting behind a stormy wake; and then, in a few moments, the great voice came shuddering and trampling back again, speaking out of the belly of a white cloud that gleamed from the sound's space, up amongst the dark. After that, silence. Then an outburst of effort about the gangways. And then silence once more. . . .

It had begun
to move

It had begun to move. Slowly, imperturbably, surrounded by that dramatic stillness, the sheet of precipitous gold, with its niches and gleaming caverns and myriad figures, drew solemnly away from us. A quiet ditch of water lay between, the ditch broadened to a lane, the lane grew rich and tremulous with reflections, returned the reflections to the sleek, black sides. The lane became a river, the vast shape fell within the compass of the eye, the high-piled terraces and the countless stars took on at last the aspect of a ship, flaming and fabulous, an argosy self-confessed.

It hung there for an instant, silent and proud, whilst the cheers of the multitude went up, and then, soundless still, it began to move through

A NUMBER OF THINGS

A splendid
chalice of the
gods

the night. The waters all about it took fire from its glory, surrounded it with a moving base of light. The rhythmical stars of its hull quivered in their courses, range surmounting range. The triple terraces above them held their packed radiance against the sky. High over all, its mast-head lights swam like four wild planets.

So it journeyed into the darkness, blazing and tremendous, a portent that the sight clung to and the imagination followed hungrily. One figured it passing before the eyes of those marshalled watchers at Seaforth and New Brighton, before the quiet lights of Blundellsands, out past the Crosby Lightship. . . . And so, at last, into the great gulfs of empty night, where there were no watchers any more, where it would seem like a splendid chalice of the gods, blazing with jewels, brimming with golden wine. . . .

And meanwhile Liverpool, having thrust her monster into the hands of the Unknown, turned easily about and sought other and milder interests.

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